

Her Worst Nightmare by Luna0603

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Adventure, Romance

Language: English

Characters: Eleven/Jane H., Mike W.

Status: Completed

Published: 2019-08-06 18:48:44

Updated: 2019-09-22 22:08:15

Packaged: 2019-12-12 17:42:38

Rating: T

Chapters: 19

Words: 76,835

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: El and Mike are adjusting to living apart. When unexpected terror brings El and the Byers family back to Hawkins, El must do everything she can to keep an innocent promise she had made to Mike. COMPLETE.

1. Chapter1

A/N: Hello everyone. This is my first Stranger Things story, and it does look like this is my first story ever on this site. However, I actually used to write a lot on this site, beginning in 2003 or 2004, under a different username. I haven't written on here in about 4 years, and I have forgotten the username, password, and email address that I used previously, so I created a new profile because after watching Stranger Things, I was finally inspired to start writing again. So, without further ado, please enjoy chapter one of my return to !

0-0-0

Saturday evening was winding down. The setting sun shone yellow through the clouds as a cool November breeze blew through the air, rustling the leaves and stirring up the smell of fall. On the front porch, the wind chimes rang loudly, but El was used to the sound. Those chimes were the first thing Mrs. Byers had hung when they arrived at their new house last month. Maybe it was to alert them to any danger approaching the house; though El knew well that anything worth fearing was perfectly capable of being still enough to not disrupt a simple pair of wind chimes. Maybe it was just so everything wasn't so quiet all the time.

El closed her eyes and breathed in the cold air deeply, the chimes ringing in her ears a familiar tune. She pulled the too-big-for-her sweatshirt she was wearing tighter around her frame and curled deeper into the right side of the sweatshirt's original owner. Mike smiled slightly and hugged her closer to him. He looked out over the spacious yard ahead of them. Mrs. Byers had certainly achieved seclusion south of Fort Wayne, Indiana. The road the house sat on was quiet, and the house itself was nice enough, but it wasn't in Hawkins, which was its only downfall. Two and a half hours does not sound like a long time in theory, but when it is the length of the drive separating you from the love of your life, and you aren't old enough to drive yet, two and a half hours might as well be an eternity.

Mike had kept his promise and come to the Byers' house for

Thanksgiving. He and Nancy had arrived Wednesday and were leaving tomorrow, Sunday afternoon. The four day reunion had flown by. Mike had seen the light in El's eyes the second Nancy had turned the car into the long winding driveway as El had opened the front door and waited on the porch, impatiently bouncing up and down. Nancy had barely put the car in park before Mike had thrown the car door open, and El was there to greet him before he had fully stood up, jumping into his arms and planting their first kiss in over a month onto his lips. What followed was a whirlwind of hugs and kisses to make up for the month they had spent apart. Mike had also been excited to catch up with Will. El had enjoyed her first real Thanksgiving dinner, and the next morning Nancy had drug Jonathan Black Friday shopping while Mike, El, and Will stayed behind to watch Christmas movies. Saturday morning, Joyce continued the family tradition of setting up and decorating the Christmas tree with her two sons, this year also including her newest addition of a daughter in El and Jonathan and El's significant others. Joyce had not stopped beaming at how her little family unit had grown and how much fun they were all having together. Mike had also been mesmerized by the pure happiness on El's face, radiating her beauty even more than normal. He absolutely could not wait to spend his first Christmas with El. But, that was another month away. Mike inhaled the cold November air which stung in his lungs along with that realization which panged in his stomach.

"Mike," El said softly, looking up at him.

"Hmm?" he responded.

"We should probably get back inside," El said.

"I know," Mike sighed. He kissed the top of his girlfriend's head, and the two of them stood from the front porch swing they had been occupying and went back inside the Byers' house. Joyce was sitting on the couch watching the evening news, and she perked up with a smile as the couple entered the living room.

"Will is in the kitchen," she said. "Help yourself to any leftovers. I'm sure we will be having turkey sandwiches all week." Mike and El nodded a thank you in response and headed toward the kitchen. There, Will was seated at the table with a textbook open, and he did

not look up as Mike and El entered.

"Do you have homework over break?" Mike asked as he walked over to the refrigerator and opened it, in search of the leftover turkey.

"Just reviewing the new unit we're going to be starting this week. Since I didn't have anything else to do," Will responded from the table, looking up at his lifelong best friend.

"You wanna watch a movie or something?" Mike asked him, picking off a piece of cold turkey meat and popping it into his mouth.

"Don't you guys want to spend your time together?" Will retorted, and Mike felt a slight pang of guilt in his stomach. Admittedly, he had not spent as much time one-on-one with Will as Will would have preferred.

"Well, yeah, but we have all night for that," Mike responded. Will's eyes widened for a split second, and Mike felt his cheeks blush a light pink when he replayed what he had innocently said.

"Yeah, we can watch a movie," Will said, closing his textbook. "What are you in the mood for? Another Christmas movie?"

"We could watch A Christmas Story," Mike offered. "It's my favorite Christmas movie, and El hasn't seen it." Will and El nodded in agreement, and Will went to grab the tape from the shelf in the living room before heading downstairs to the basement to make sure the VCR was hooked up.

Mike and El joined Will in the basement, the two of them curling up on the couch and Will leaning back in the recliner. For the next hour and a half, the three of them enjoyed the story of Ralphie's childhood Christmas, El for the first time. She laughed at poor Flick's misfortune when he learned that tongues do, in fact, stick to frozen poles. She playfully jabbed Mike in the ribs when he whistled at the infamous leg lamp. She looked at her boyfriend in confusion when the camera cut to Ralphie sitting alone with a bar of soap in his mouth ("That's a form of punishment parents use to 'wash your mouth out' after they hear you say cuss words," Mike had explained.). When the movie was over, it was going on 9 o'clock.

"I should really get back to reviewing for class this week," Will said, knowing that even though Mike wouldn't say it, he wanted to get a good start on his last night alone with El.

"All right. We're probably gonna get ready for bed and turn in early," Mike said, as Will had expected.

After hugging Joyce good night, Mike and El retreated to El's bedroom at the end of the hallway and closed the door. Mike sat on the edge of her bed and watched her as she pulled a pair of pajama shorts and one of his t-shirts out of her dresser and laid them over the back of her desk chair. El looked back and caught his glance before walking toward him, standing in front of him right between his knees. She took his right hand in her left and kissed his forehead, twirling a strand of hair from the back of his head with her right hand. Mike wrapped his arms around El's waist and pulled her closer to him, resting his head against her abdomen. He sat silently as she stood there in his arms, twirling that same strand of his hair.

"I don't want to leave," Mike sighed after some time. El stopped playing with his hair and pulled back a bit, looking down at her boyfriend who raised his eyes to meet hers.

"I don't want you to leave either," she said. They both had known this moment would come. As excited as they had been to see each other again, they knew it would be short-lived until the next time.

"Why don't you go shower and we'll get ready for bed," Mike suggested. El nodded, grabbed her nightclothes from the back of the desk chair, and left the room to go shower. She returned fifteen minutes later, dressed in the t-shirt and pajama shorts, her shoulder-length brownish-blond hair still damp from being towel-dried. Mike then took his turn in the shower and returned after ten minutes in pajama pants and another of his own t-shirts, his own dark hair still damp. He turned off the overhead light and climbed into El's bed next to her. Mike laid on his back with his right arm around El who laid on her left side, nuzzling her head on his chest and draping her right arm over Mike's stomach. They laid peacefully like that for several minutes, neither of them actually trying to sleep, both of them simply enjoying each other's presence.

"El," Mike said softly.

"Yeah?" she responded, not lifting her head from its place on his chest.

"I'm gonna miss you so much," he said. El squeezed her right arm around him and nodded her head in agreement.

"I'm going to miss you too," she agreed. "But we will see each other again for Christmas."

"That's just so far away," Mike said. El did not reply. She knew it was only a month, but she also knew how neverending the previous month had felt between her moving from Hawkins and them being together for Thanksgiving.

"I know it is," she finally said when Mike did not speak. "But we can keep talking on our walkies and on the phone."

"It just isn't the same," Mike objected. "I feel like I'm losing you all over again." His voice caught at the end of that sentence, and Mike did his best to swallow the lump that had formed in his throat.

"What do you mean?" El asked sweetly, lifting her head so she was facing her boyfriend, resting her chin upon his chest.

"I mean," Mike started and paused to sigh, "you came into my life out of nowhere. And I fell for you from the beginning. Then I lost you. I called you every night for 353 excruciatingly long days. And you came back to me." Mike swallowed the lump that had returned to his throat and did his best to blink back the tears that were beginning to line his eyelids, hoping El would not notice. Another squeeze of her arm around his body made him think that she may have.

"Then," Mike continued, "we were together, and I had never been happier. Then I was stupid, and you dumped me. I lost you again. I know it was only a couple days, and we had bigger problems going on at that time, but even with the Mind Flayer reigning terror, I couldn't get out of my head the idea of not being with you. Then you took me back. And three months later you left again to move here. I know we talk every day, but hearing your voice is so much different

from seeing your face, feeling you here with me. El, these last 4 days have been amazing. But tomorrow I have to go home. Then the same thing will happen next month. And it's like I'm losing you all over again. And my heart breaks all over again each time." Mike's voice caught again and this time a tear escaped his eye. El reached over and wiped the tear from her boyfriend's cheek, feeling tears brim her own eyelids.

"I didn't know you felt this way," she whispered. "Mike, I'm sorry."

"No, that's not it, you don't have to be sorry," Mike said. "It's not your fault."

"I wish I could be with you more, and I miss you so much when you're not with me," El said. "I don't want to break your heart." After several moments, El asked quietly with a tear escaping from each of her own eyes, "Would it be easier to break up?"

"What?" Mike asked suddenly, feeling his stomach drop at the idea. "No, of course not. I never want us to break up." El smiled at his response, and Mike sat up in bed, pulling her up to sit in front of him, facing each other. "It's going to be hard. But like you said, we have our walkies. And next year I'll get my driver's license, and I can come see you on weekends. And who knows, maybe eventually Mrs. Byers will feel okay with moving back to Hawkins." El nodded along, knowing the latter was not likely to happen.

"We just have to make it through the hurt right now," she said. "The hurt is good." She smiled as she remembered where she first read those words. Mike caressed the back of her hand with his thumb.

"The hurt will be good someday," he nodded. "But the hurt is worth it." El was looking down, watching Mike's hand holding hers, his thumb making small circles on the back of her hand. She looked back up when she heard him sigh deeply.

"El, there's one more thing," Mike said.

"What?" El asked.

"I'm leaving tomorrow, and I know that you already know, but I still

have never actually told you myself how I feel," Mike began. "About you," he added.

"Mike, it's okay, I know you l-" El began, but Mike interrupted her.

"I want to say it," he said. "And I want you to know why I haven't said it. I don't want you to think it's because I don't feel that way. It's just, when I blurted it out that day at the cabin, that's the first time I had really admitted it to myself out loud. And then when you said it at the Byers' old house when you were moving away, I was just so shocked that you could be saying those words to me, I didn't know how to respond." El smiled sweetly at him, wondering how Mike could have possibly been shocked by her feelings for him. Of course she felt that way about him.

"And I know I haven't said it over the walkie or over the phone, and that's because I feel like the first time I say it to you, really say it to you, it should be in person," Mike continued. He took a deep breath and looked El right in the eyes. "El, I love you."

"I love you too," El replied with a smile. She leaned forward, and their lips met. Their kiss intensified as Mike placed his hands on her waist and El moved her hands up behind Mike's neck and into his hair. Soon, Mike was leaning backward to lay down and pulling El forward with him, their locked lips not leaving each other's. He felt the warmth of the length of her body pressed against his, and he gently moved his hands up and down El's back. When their lips did part, El placed her forehead against Mike's and stared into his eyes. She rolled off him onto her left side and resumed her favorite cuddling position with her head on his chest and her right arm draped over his body.

"I can't wait for more of that over Christmas," Mike joked, and El chuckled.

"Good night, Mike," she said.

"Good night, El," Mike replied.

"And don't worry, even if it feels like it right now, you will never lose me again," El added.

"Promise?" Mike asked.

"Promise."

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A/N: That is it for chapter one. I will update this as often as I can. There are plenty of action-packed chapters coming up and of course, plenty of scenes of my favorite couple... which is Mileven, if you needed clarification. Reviews and feedback are always welcome. Thank you for reading!

2. Chapter 2

A/N: Thank you all for your kind reviews and for welcoming me back into the world of fanfiction. I look forward to seeing how this story unfolds!

Also, I did not previously add a disclaimer, so here it is: I do not own Stranger Things or any of the characters.

Stranger Records: Thank you! I appreciate it.

El Henderson: Thank you! It feels good to be back.

JayneFawn: Thank you! I'm glad you enjoyed the first chapter. You will just have to keep reading to find out

Disneyprincess315: Thank you so much!

Tank03: Thank you for your feedback. I am glad you are enjoying it so far! And I always appreciate any quibbles, big or small.

Exploding Helmets: Thank you! I'm glad you enjoyed chapter one.

Winterzweibel: Actually, A Christmas Carol and A Christmas Story are two different movies! A Christmas Carol is the Charles Dickens story of Scrooge, and A Christmas Story is a Christmas movie from the 1980's that focus on a family in the 1940s. It is actually my favorite Christmas movie, so if you haven't seen it, I absolutely recommend it!

CaptainRex12: Thank you! I am happy to be back to writing, and I am glad you are enjoying it so far.

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Sunday afternoon around one o'clock, Nancy and Mike shoved their duffle bags into the backseat of Nancy's car. Joyce, El, Jonathan, and Will had accompanied the Wheelers outside to bid their goodbyes. Nancy and Jonathan were sharing their own tearful goodbye against

the driver's side door when El walked up to Mike on the passenger's side and wrapped her arms around his waist, embracing him in a tight hug. Mike kissed the top of her forehead and squeezed her against his body.

"I had such a great time," he said as El pulled back from the embrace.

"Me too," El smiled. "Will you let me know when you make it home?"

"Of course," Mike promised, grinning at El's concern for his safety.

"I'm so happy you were able to come. I'm going to miss you," El said, feeling tears threatening to escape her eyes.

"I know. I'll miss you too. But like we said last night, it won't be like this forever. And Christmas will be here before we know it," Mike reminded her. El nodded and brought her hands up to his neck, pulling his lips to hers.

"Have a safe trip," she said. "I love you."

"I love you too," Mike replied, leaning in for a final kiss.

"Thanks for coming, honey," Joyce said as she approached Mike with her arms outstretched for a hug of her own.

"Of course. Thank you for having us," Mike replied, tightly hugging his best friend's mother. When Joyce moved past him to say goodbye to Nancy, Will walked toward Mike, looking at the ground.

"I hope you had a good week," he said, a smile that looked forced on his face.

"I did," Mike said, offering a genuine smile. "It was great to see you again."

"Yeah, you too," Will said shortly, accepting the brief hug that Mike offered. He then looked over the top of the car at Nancy and called "Drive safe" before walking back into the house.

"What's wrong with him?" Mike wondered out loud, looking after Will.

"Okay, Mike, we have to get going," Nancy finally said, Mike's previous question going unanswered. Nancy and Mike each gave their significant others a final goodbye hug before getting into the car to drive back home to Hawkins. Joyce, El, and Jonathan watched the car disappear before going back inside.

El was on her way down the hall to her bedroom, and when she passed Will's room, the door was open halfway and Will was seated on his bed reading a comic book. El paused, thought about Mike's concern for Will before he had left, and decided to make sure her new brother was okay. She knocked lightly on the doorframe, and Will looked up, met her gaze, and looked back down at his comic.

"Will? Can I come in?" El asked from the doorway.

"Sure, what's up?" Will answered, not looking up from his book. El entered the room and crossed to the bed, sitting on the edge.

"What are you reading?" she asked, gesturing toward the comic.

"X-Men," Will answered simply, holding the front cover up briefly.

"Cool. I haven't ever read any of the X-Men," El said, hoping Will would accept her attempt at a conversation. When he didn't, she decided to press on. "Will, is everything okay?"

"Fine," Will replied, turning a page in his book. El pursed her lips, not believing him, but not wanting to make him angry with her either.

"Are you sure? Becau-"

"I'm sure," Will interrupted. He glanced over at El when she did not stand up to leave. "Are you just looking for something to do until Mike gets home and calls you?"

"What do you mean?" El asked, not entirely picking up on the meaning behind Will's question.

"I mean, is that why you're paying attention to me now?" he clarified.

"No, of course not," El replied. "You just seemed upset."

"I'm fine," Will sighed. El stared at the side of his head while Will's eyes remained focused on his comic book. She wanted to grab him by the shoulders and shake him until he told her what was bothering him, but she was still new to having brothers and didn't want to overstep with Will.

"Okay," El said, finally moving to stand up. Will sighed and closed his comic book.

"It's just that this week kind of sucked for me," he said, and El sat back down, happy that Will may be about to open up to her.

"Why did it suck?" she asked curiously.

"I don't think it's a secret that I'm not having a good time in this new town," Will started. "I don't know anybody here, and you know I've only made like two friends. I miss my friends in Hawkins, and I miss my school. Yeah, bullies sucked, but I had my friends to have my back."

"I know the move has been hard," El sympathized.

"So I was really excited for Mike to come spend Thanksgiving with us," Will continued. "But all week, I think I had maybe one conversation with him one-on-one each day, and that was just while you were showering or something. I didn't really get to hang out with him just the two of us."

"Oh," El said, not able to hide the hurt that Will saw in her eyes.

"It's not that I don't love having you with us. That's not it at all," he immediately assured her. "It's just that Mike's always been my best friend, and we used to be able to talk all the time and go places and do things and have a great time together. And this week it just seemed like whenever he talked to me, it was just to kill the time until he was with you again, not because he actually cared about talking or hanging out with me."

"But you know he cares about you," El said.

"Not as much as he cares about you," Will countered. "Which I know is unfair of me to say. And I am happy for both of you. I was just

really looking forward to seeing my best friend over Thanksgiving, and I guess I just feel let down."

"I'm sorry, Will," El said, nodding her understanding. As El thought about it, she realized that Will was right; Mike really didn't make time to hang out with just Will.

"It's okay. I just have to get used to you guys being in a long distance relationship and accept that when I do get to see Mike, it'll probably be the three of us," Will said.

"I don't want you to feel upset," El said. "When we go to the Wheelers' house for Christmas, I promise I will make sure Mike makes time for you without me. I can even spend a night over at Max's house!"

"Are you sure?" Will asked. "I know how badly you two want to see each other when you're apart. Honestly, that's why Mom ended up caving and letting him sleep in your room the last few nights."

"What?" El asked, her eyes widening in surprise.

"You didn't wonder why Mike was suddenly allowed to sleep in your room after the first night?" Will asked her.

"Well, I was just so happy that he was able to, that I didn't think about why," El admitted.

"El, Wednesday night when Mike slept on my floor, you were the only thing he wanted to talk about. What he wanted you guys to do while he was here, what he wanted to get you for Christmas, all kinds of stuff. But it was all about you," Will explained and chuckled at how pink El's cheeks were turning. "Thursday morning I told Mom that I thought it would be better for Mike and for you if you two could spend the remaining nights together."

"And she changed her mind just like that?" El asked, shocked.

"She must have," Will replied with a shrug. "But I don't know if you'll get as lucky with Mrs. Wheeler or not over Christmas. She might give you Mike's bed and make him sleep in the basement or something."

"We'll have to wait and see," El smiled. El and Will hung out for a

while longer, and Will introduced her to the X-Men comic he was reading. After about a half hour, El went into the living room and found Joyce sitting on the couch, drinking a glass of wine and flipping through the channels on the television.

"Hey Mom," El said, sitting next to her on the couch. Joyce smiled warmly, still not fully used to El calling her "Mom," but certainly liking the way it sounds.

"Hi sweetheart," she replied. She noticed the look of question on El's face and was confused because it appeared to be mixed with happiness. Then again, maybe the wine was affecting her judgement of El's expression. "What's on your mind?"

"This might be a weird question, but why did you let Mike sleep in my room after the first night?" El asked. Joyce let out a chuckle and set her wineglass down on the coffee table in front of her.

"Honestly, against all the better mom judgement in the world, it felt like the right decision," she replied. "Honey, I knew how excited you were to see him again, and after the first night, Will told me that Mike was driving him crazy talking about you. So I thought long and hard about it, and I just decided that after all that you have been through together, it was something I could allow."

"I am sure my dad would have disagreed," El laughed.

"Absolutely. But, I am also pretty sure your dad is still instilling fear in Mike from heaven," Joyce joked. She saw the look of reflection cross El's face as she happily remembered her police chief father. Joyce put her arm around El's shoulders and squeezed her tight. "I know you're a teenager, but I can't pretend that you've led a normal teenage life. I just hope that you feel comfortable enough with me to talk about anything that you may be thinking or feeling."

"I am," El nodded. She rested her head on Joyce's shoulder, happy to finally have a strong mother figure in her life. A few moments later, El heard the familiar static coming from her walkie down the hall and excused herself.

"El, do you copy?" her boyfriend's voice rang through the walkie

which was set on her desk. She laughed every time she remembered his promise to steal Cerebro from Dustin and call her all the time.

"I'm here," she replied into it, laying back onto her bed. "You made it home?"

"Yeah, we just got home," Mike replied. "What are you doing tonight?"

"Not much. Probably having turkey for dinner again," El said, wrinkling her nose. "Turkey is good, but is it normal to eat it for days and days after Thanksgiving?"

"Yes," Mike laughed. "You'll literally eat the same dinner every night for a week. So how is Will? He seemed off when Nancy and I were leaving."

"Will is okay," El said slowly, feeling like it was not her place to share what Will had spoken with her about. "Maybe you should give him a call tonight."

"Yeah I can do that," Mike agreed. "Well hey, I have to get off of here. Mom's calling me for dinner. But I wanted to let you know we made it home."

"Okay. Have a good night, and I'll talk to you tomorrow," El said. "And remember to call Will!"

"All right, I will," Mike agreed. "I love you."

"I love you too."

0-0-0

A/N: I hope you enjoyed the El/Will and El/Joyce moments. The next chapter will have a slight time jump. We won't be going too far ahead, but the story will not be taking place one day at a time by any means. I hope you are all enjoying it so far. Feel free to leave any reviews, and I will update soon! Thanks for reading!

3. Chapter 3

A/N: Welcome back to Chapter 3! Thank you all so much for being patient with me between chapters. I don't have a working computer at home, as my laptop crapped out on me, so I have to do all of my writing at the public library. Due to my schedule, I am not able to make it to the library Friday-Monday, but I will do my best to write every Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. So please keep that in mind, and enjoy Chapter 3!

Tank03: Quibble forgotten :) I am glad you are enjoying the story!

CaptainRex12: Thank you! Individually responding to each review is something I started doing back when I was originally writing on the site. I am not sure how often it is done by others, but it will be done by me on every chapter of every story I write.

El Henderson: Thank you! I am glad you are enjoying it. I will be sure to continue focusing on the different relationships.

Grievesforyou: Thank you so much. I am glad you like it!

Disclaimer: I do not own Stranger Things or any of its characters.

0-0-0

A few weeks later, the week before Christmas, El and Will were getting excited for their week and a half long stay in Hawkins. Christmas Day was on a Wednesday, and their friends did not have to go back to school until Monday, January 6, so El and Will were staying until Sunday the fifth. On Sunday, December 15, ten days before Christmas, Joyce was taking the kids to the mall so they could do their Christmas shopping, as she had shopping of her own to finish up. She pulled into a spot at the mall and pulled her wallet out of her purse, handing Will and El each \$100. El's eyes widened at the paper in her hand.

"Mom, are you sure? That's a lot of money," Will said, voicing the

shock that El was also feeling.

"It's Christmas," Joyce smiled. "I want you both to get all your shopping done, and I expect change back from both of you." They walked into the main entrance of the mall, and Joyce pointed at the fountain in the middle. "Meet here in two hours."

"Okay. Thanks Mom," Will said and gave her a hug. El also thanked and hugged Joyce before she headed away down the main aisle, leaving El and Will to figure out their plan for the day.

"All right, so we've got Mike, Lucas, Dustin, Max, Jonathan, my mom, and each other," Will counted on his fingers. "Where do you want to start? El?" El was barely listening to him, as she was looking around the mall, mesmerized by the holiday cheer surrounding her. There was garland and ribbons lining the doorway to each store and hanging from the ceiling; there was a giant Christmas tree set up in front of the fountain Joyce had pointed at; next to the Christmas tree was a small red house where Santa Claus was set up in front, smiling and speaking with children one by one who were lined up on the red carpet in front of him. The Santa scene was also decorated with fake snow, reindeer, and a sleigh. "Have a Holly Jolly Christmas" was currently playing through the speakers. El felt like she was in the mall from A Christmas Story.

"El?" Will said again, louder, and waved his hand in front of her face.

"S-sorry," she stammered, shaking her head and coming back to Earth.

"Where do you want to start?" he repeated his question.

"I don't know," El answered slowly. She had only ever been in a mall twice in her life: once for the girls' day with Max and once to fight the Mind Flayer. She had certainly never been Christmas shopping.

"Well, who should we start with?" Will attempted.

"I... don't know... what to get them," El said quietly, shifting her eyes away from Will.

"It's okay," he assured her. "We can figure that out. I've been friends

with Mike, Dustin, and Lucas for years, and Christmas shopping is still hard." Will didn't want El to feel overwhelmed, so he took her hand and started leading her down the main aisle. El recognized some of the stores that had also been in the mall in Hawkins like The Gap and JC Penney. There were also lots of stores she had never been in before, and looking at the displays through the windows, she had no idea how she was supposed to find something for seven people in two hours.

"What do you usually get them?" she asked.

"The boys aren't really too hard. I usually find comics or a poster or something," Will replied. "Honestly I think Max will be the hardest for me. Other than my mom, I've never really had to get a girl a gift before."

"I can help you with Max," El offered. "That day we went shopping, she showed me lots of things that she liked."

"Great. Let's go in here," Will pointed at a comic book store they were approaching. El stuck closely by Will as he walked up and down the sides of the displays of comics.

"What are you looking for?" she asked.

"Nothing in particular," Will replied. "I just sort of wait until something jumps out at me." El recognized some of the characters from comics she had seen at Mike's house and at Max's house, but there were so many covers that she had no idea who the characters were.

"Do you read all of these?" she asked.

"Just about," Will laughed. "I at least know the stories of most of them." They roamed the store a bit longer, and Will picked up a few comics to explain a bit to El. When they left the store, they moved into the game store next door. Will took her over to a display of Star Wars figurines and started naming the characters for her.

"Has Mike shown you Star Wars yet?" he asked. El shook her head. "You've seen enough Christmas movies. We're watching the Star Wars

trilogy when we're there for Christmas." After shopping around in the game store for a while, Will and El walked through a couple female clothing stores, looking at hats and accessories that Max would like. After an hour and a half, Will had made his purchases for everyone on his list, including Eleven who he had purchased for secretly while she was spinning through a display of sunglasses. El had finished shopping for everyone except Mike and Will. She still didn't know what to get Mike, and she wasn't as sneaky as Will was to shop for him right in front of him.

"So do you have anyone left?" Will asked.

"I still haven't gotten anything for Mike yet," El replied. "I just don't know what to get him. It's our first Christmas celebrating together, and I don't know what you're supposed to get a boyfriend for Christmas."

"It depends on what he likes," Will shrugged. "Mike's into nerdy things like the other guys you bought for."

"Yeah, but it's different," El said. "I don't think I can just get him a poster or a comic book or a figurine."

"I know what you mean," Will said, thinking hard. "Unless it's something rare that he would really want."

"I don't think I can get anything too rare with \$70," El said, looking at the money she had left. She had known she would want to spend the most money on Mike, so she tried to have as much left over as she could after picking things out for everyone else.

"Maybe not, but let's go back to that game store," Will suggested, grabbing her hand again and pulling her back in the direction where they had started. They walked inside, and Will led El up to the counter where a man in his mid-twenties was standing behind a display case next to the cash register. "Excuse me."

"What can I do for ya?" the employee asked.

"We're looking for something, I don't know, kind of unique?" Will started. "Something that a fifteen-year-old boy would really

appreciate from his girlfriend."

"Most fifteen-year-old boys would just appreciate having a girlfriend in the first place," the man whose nametag read Chad said. "But, if I had to guess, since you're in this store and all, does he like superheroes? Star Wars? Dungeons and Dragons?"

"Yes," Will replied.

"Come on down," Chad waved with his arm for Will and El to follow him to the end of the display case he was standing behind. "These are pretty collectible. Got some made of gold, some sterling silver. I'd assume you've already asked next door about any rare comic books?"

"We're kind of working on a budget," Will said, not wanting to know the price tags on some of the items behind the glass he was looking at.

"In that case," Chad chuckled and walked the entire length of the display case to the other side. "These are all handcrafted, solid wood. Beautiful craftsmanship if you ask me." Will and El peered through the glass at their options, and El saw something she recognized.

"Can we see that up close, please?" she asked, pointing at the wooden figure of the Millennium Falcon. Chad pulled it out of the case and handed it to her. El was surprised that it was heavier than she was anticipating.

"This is hand carved?" Will asked.

"It is," Chad nodded.

"It's beautiful," El murmured, inspecting the intricate woodwork.

"Not a word a typically hear here, but sure," Chad said. "Interested?" A short while later, El and Will were leaving the store with the wooden Millennium Falcon purchased. El had been certain she wouldn't be able to afford it, but Chad had surprisingly worked with them. On the way back to the fountain where they were going to meet Joyce, El's stomach dropped quickly as she realized she had not bought Will anything yet. Feeling like a horrible sister, she assured herself that she will just explain to Joyce that she couldn't figure out

a way to buy him something while he was with her, and she will ask Joyce to let her go to the store another afternoon before Christmas.

"Will! El!" Joyce called to them through the crowded mall, and the two made their way over to her. "How was it? Got everything?" The two teenagers nodded. Joyce grabbed her own shopping bags from next to her, and the three of them left the mall. When they got home, Joyce joined El in her bedroom and offered to help El wrap her presents. El happily agreed, and the two of them spent the rest of the afternoon wrapping the presents, Joyce teaching El exactly how to fold the wrapping paper and not use too much tape. When they were finished, El smiled happily at her pile of wrapped presents, excited to spend her first Christmas with the people she really loved.

A week and a half later, El was startled awake by Will pushing her bedroom door open and exclaiming "Merry Christmas!"

"Will, it's so early," El groaned, rubbing her eyes. "Does everyone get up this early on Christmas?"

"Everyone who cares about presents," Will replied excited. "Get up!" El sighed but obliged. She followed Will down the hallway and into the living room where Joyce and Jonathan were already sitting awaiting them. El smelled the freshly brewed coffee and toasting Eggos in the air and felt her stomach rumble.

"Presents first, then breakfast," Will said as if he had been reading her mind.

"All right, all right. Who wants to play Santa?" Joyce asked.

"I did it last year," Jonathan said.

"Why doesn't El do it?" Will suggested. "She needs the whole Christmas experience."

"Great idea," Joyce agreed. El looked in confusion as Joyce stepped near her and placed a red hat on her head with white fluff around the edge and a white puffy ball on the end.

"A Santa hat?" El asked, recognizing the hat from the Santas she had seen in various Christmas movies and in the mall the week prior.

"You're playing Santa, you have to wear the hat," Will said.

"Playing Santa means that you take each present out from under the tree and pass them out to who they belong," Joyce explained. El nodded her understanding and looked at the small piles of presents under the Christmas tree that they and their friends had decorated the month before. She smiled and reached under the tree, pulling out her first round of gifts. El read the tags and passed them out, and then she, Jonathan, Will, and Joyce tore off the wrapping paper. This repeated until all the presents were opened, and El looked happily around the living room at everyone's new presents. She had gotten a picture frame from Jonathan along with the promise to develop any photo she wanted to put inside it, a sketch pad and colored pencils from Will, and some sweaters, hair clips, and makeup from Joyce. El felt the love and happiness in the room as Joyce beamed at her children.

"Merry Christmas kids," Joyce said.

"Merry Christmas," the three of them replied.

"Now let's go have some breakfast before you get ready to leave for Hawkins," Joyce said. El and Will jumped up and ran to the kitchen; Joyce and Jonathan followed behind them. They enjoyed a breakfast of Eggos and hot chocolate before heading down the hall to shower and get ready for their trip.

"El?" Joyce knocked on El's door. El had just gotten out of the shower and hadn't heard the phone ring. "Mike is on the phone for you."

"Okay!" El called back through the door. She quickly pulled a t-shirt on, deciding she will pick out her outfit after her phone call, and hurried into the kitchen to answer the phone.

"Hello?" she said into the receiver.

"Merry Christmas!" Mike exclaimed on the other end.

"Merry Christmas," El smiled back. She looked at the clock on the wall and saw it was still only 7:30. El was starting to realize how big of a deal Christmas really was.

"How was your Christmas morning? Did you get anything good?" Mike asked.

"It was good. Some sweaters and girly stuff from Mrs. Byers, a sketch pad and pencils from Will, and a picture frame from Jonathan," El replied.

"Awesome! We'll have to make sure you get a good picture while you're here so you can put it in the frame," Mike said.

"What did you get?" El asked.

"Some movies, some games, comics, a bunch of clothes," Mike shrugged. "I can't wait to see you today."

"I know, neither can I. We are getting ready now. I just got out of the shower," El said.

"Are you leaving early?" Mike asked, and El smiled at the risen excitement in his voice.

"I think we're leaving whenever we're ready to go. He doesn't say it much, but I know Jonathan is really excited to see Nancy too, so he will probably not want to wait too long to go," El said.

"Well I'll let you go so you can finish getting ready and I can see you sooner," Mike said. "I just wanted to call and see how your Christmas is starting off, and of course to say I miss you and love you."

"Well I'm glad you called. I miss you too, and I love you," El replied.

"Have a safe trip, and I'll see you soon," Mike said before they hung up. El hurried back down the hallway to finish getting ready. She dressed in a pair of jeans and a blue sweater that Joyce had gotten her for Christmas. She pulled the sides of her hair back from the front of her face and clipped it in place in the back of her head with a matching blue hair clip, and lastly she put on a light coat of mascara and some lip gloss. El grabbed the bag she had already packed for their trip, and she went down the hall to meet the boys.

"Ready?" Jonathan asked. He and Will had already finished loading all of the presents into Jonathan's car.

"Yes!" El replied.

"Have a great time," Joyce said, giving each of the three a tight hug. "Drive safe, and call me when you get there. Merry Christmas." Jonathan, Will, and El gave their goodbyes and loaded into the car bound for Hawkins. El's first Christmas celebration was off to a fantastic start, and she knew it was going to get even better in just two and a half hours.

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A/N: Thank you again for reading and for your patience with my schedule. I wish I could write more days than just Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, but this schedule does give me a lot of time to plan and revise my story's outline. I also have several future stories in the works, so stay tuned for those! Please let me know what you are thinking of this story so far. I hope this chapter lived up to what you were hoping for. I plan to update again tomorrow evening, and you will get to see the gang's Christmas at the Wheeler house! Until then, thank you for reading, and please drop me a review to let me know what you think.

4. Chapter 4

A/N: Welcome back and thank you for reading so far!

Stranger Things: In the last chapter, you saw her buy for everyone except Will because she was unable to buy for him while he was with her. Sorry for any confusion!

39CluesFan-Star: Thank you! I will update as often as I can, I promise! And I also just watched Stranger Things for the first time about a month ago. Everyone was making such a big deal online about ST3, so I watched all 3 seasons in about a week, and I am obsessed!

Tank03: Thank you. I enjoy focusing on relationships between all the different characters, but I am very excited to write more Mike and El scenes! I am glad you are liking it so far.

Disclaimer: I do not own Stranger Things or any of its characters.

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"El! EL!" El jerked awake to the sound of Will's voice and looked out the window her head and just been resting on to see the Welcome to Hawkins sign as they passed it.

"Good morning, sleepy head," Jonathan joked, turning down The Clash tape that he was playing. "Christmas morning tire you out?"

"Sorry I fell asleep," El said groggily, swallowing hard and stretching her arms out. She watched out the window at the familiar scene they were passing through. She recognized the curves of the road they were on, and the trees were the same as they were when she was here two months ago, except their branches were bare and a dusting of snow covered them. She smiled, feeling almost home.

"It's okay. Will fell asleep too, so it was actually kind of nice," Jonathan said. He turned on to Maple Street, and El felt her stomach do a somersault and her heart rate increased in excitement. She could

see the Wheelers' house in the distance, growing slowly closer, and knew she was a few short minutes away from being reunited with Mike and the rest of her friends. Jonathan put the car in park right as the front door of the house opened and Mike and Nancy stepped outside. By the time El had opened her car door, Mike was there to greet her. She connected her hands around his neck and jumped into Mike's arms, lifting her legs around his waist to hold herself up. Mike wrapped his arms tightly around her waist and his lips were met with a deep kiss from his girlfriend.

"Hey," he breathed when El pulled back from his mouth. El could see in Mike's eyes that he was surprised by her passionate greeting.

"Hi," she smiled and buried her face in his neck as she hugged him tightly. "I've missed you."

"I've missed you too," Mike replied. El let her legs drop and she stood on her own two feet again. Next to them, Will cleared his throat and Mike and El looked over to see him with a slightly awkward look on his face.

"Hey, Merry Christmas," Will said, extending his arms for a hug.

"Merry Christmas. It's great to see you," Mike said, hugging his best friend. "Let's go inside; it's freezing out here."

"Good luck getting our stuff," Will smirked and pointed toward the trunk of the car that Jonathan had Nancy pressed up against while they had reunion kisses of their own.

"Get a room," Mike said and playfully shoved Nancy off of the trunk of the car.

"Yeah like we didn't see your little makeout session, too, Mike," Nancy retorted, although her cheeks pinked slightly. Jonathan opened the trunk, and he, Mike, and Will carried everyone's bags and the wrapped presents into the house. When they stepped inside, El was faced with more Christmas cheer than she had seen even at the mall last week. Garland lined every doorway, lights and garland were wrapped all the way up the railing of the stairs and draped over the fireplace, there were little figurines set up on various surfaces which

Mike would later explain to her as a Nativity scene and Christmas village scenes, and in the living room there was a fully decorated tree nearly twice the size of the Byers'. The air also smelled heavenly, and El felt her stomach rumble a bit.

"My mom goes a little overboard with the indoor Christmas decorations," Mike said, watching El look around at her surroundings. The boys had dropped all the bags near the front door, and Karen Wheeler came into the entryway from the kitchen, her arms outstretched.

"Merry Christmas!" she exclaimed and wrapped Will in a warm hug.

"Merry Christmas, Mrs. Wheeler," Will returned.

"Merry Christmas, El. How are you?" Karen turned to hug her son's girlfriend.

"Merry Christmas. I am doing well, thank you," El answered politely. She knew that Joyce had explained to Karen that El had been Hopper's niece from an estranged brother who had gotten into legal trouble the year prior, which had led to Hopper gaining legal guardianship of El. Karen also believed El's full name to be Eleanor. Still, even though the Wheelers seemingly accepted Joyce's story, El was careful to watch what she said around her boyfriend's parents. She didn't want them to suspect anything even more unusual than the story they had been fed.

"We will be eating dinner at 5. If you're hungry before then, feel free to raid the kitchen, but on Christmas Day, I give all my attention to dinner," Karen said. "Mike, what time are the rest of your friends getting here?"

"Around 3 I think," Mike answered. Karen looked at her watch and appeared the count the hours she had left before her house was overtaken by teenagers, and turned on her heel to head back to the kitchen.

"So we have until 5," Nancy said suggestively to Jonathan, wriggling her eyebrows and wrapping her hands around his neck. She gave him a kiss on the lips before taking his hand and pulling him behind her

up the stairs.

"Disgusting," Will grunted, shaking his head. He noticed the smirk on Mike's face and became slightly annoyed. "What, I guess you two want to go do that too and leave me down here to help your mom cook or something?"

"What? No, of course not," Mike answered quickly while El shook her head, though Will was sure they were lying. "Come on, let's go downstairs. I haven't talked to you in forever. I want to hear everything."

Mike, El, and Will gathered in the basement, El curling up into Mike's side on the couch with his arm around her, and Will seated in the armchair across from them. They spent the next couple of hours catching up; Will told Mike everything about his new high school, what teachers he liked, what teachers he didn't like, the coursework they were learning, friends he made, projects he was working on. Will also told him about going to see Rocky IV in theatres with Jonathan a couple weeks ago. He assured Mike that he still hadn't even thought about joining another party. When Will asked about Mike, he told Will about how school was going as well, and he shared some stories from hanging out with Dustin, Lucas, and Max. They had accompanied Dustin a few more times to speak with Suzie, and Mike thought she was actually pretty cool. El talked a bit about how homeschooling was going and that she was excited to hopefully start at the high school with Will the following fall. Of course, Mike knew most of what El was saying already since the two of them talked much more regularly than Mike and Will.

"Oh, also, while we're here, we need to watch the Star Wars trilogy. El says she's never seen it," Will said.

"Okay! I mean, if you're sure you want to spend a full day watching movies," Mike said, looking at El.

"If I don't like the first one, we don't have to watch the other two," El said with a shrug.

"If you don't like that first one, *you* don't have to watch the other two," Mike laughed. "But I'm not starting the trilogy and not finishing

it."

"Well then it better be as good as Will says," El said. Mike chuckled and squeezed her closer to him, rubbing her shoulder. El laid her head down on Mike's shoulder and closed her eyes.

"Well," Will began after a few moments of silence, "I think I'm gonna go take a nap before the others get here."

"You don't have to go," Mike said, feeling a bit guilty because he knew Will was trying to give Mike and El some alone time.

"No, I really am tired. And I want to be well-rested for everyone this evening," Will persisted. "I'm gonna use your bed." Mike nodded his approval and Will walked upstairs, leaving Mike and El alone with each other for the first time in a month.

"Are you trying to take a nap too?" Mike asked, looking down at El whose eyes were still closed on his shoulder.

"I'm just so tired," she said sitting up. "Will woke me up at 6:15 this morning."

"Sounds about right," Mike laughed.

"But why," El whined.

"I don't know, it's just what you do on Christmas. You get up super early, you unwrap presents, you have breakfast, then you spend the rest of the day showing off those presents, eating all sorts of food, and napping because you got up so damn early," Mike explained as if this was common practice for everyone on Christmas Day.

"So... what did you get me?" El asked, playfully holding out her hand as if she expected Mike to place his gift to her in it.

"You'll just have to wait and see," Mike said, closing her outstretched hand and bringing it to his lips to kiss the back of it.

"I'm sure I'll love it, whatever it is," El said.

"I really hope you do," Mike replied seriously. El smiled and looked

into his brown eyes while twirling a piece of his hair at the base of his neck.

"Of course I will," she said. El looked over at the clock on the wall and saw that it was 1:30. "We have about an hour and a half before everyone else gets here. What do you want to do?"

"I have some ideas," Mike said, the corners of his mouth curling up into a suggestive grin. He leaned closer to El until the gap between his lips and hers was closed. El kept her one hand behind his neck in his hair and raised her other hand to the side of Mike's face, cupping his cheek. Mike had one hand tangled in El's hair and the other rested on her thigh, and he slowly began to move his kisses from her mouth down to the side of her neck. El let out a small groan closed her fist tightly, pulling his hair. Mike moved his kisses back up to El's lips and gently slipped his tongue through the small opening. El breathed in sharply but quickly reciprocated, allowing her tongue to intertwine with her boyfriend's. El felt Mike begin to shift and felt his hands on her waist pulling her slightly up and toward him. He laid down on his back and pulled El forward so that she was laying on top of him, not breaking their kiss. Their display of passion continued for quite a while until El gently pulled back and laid her head down on Mike's chest to rest, placing her right hand over his heart and softly rubbing her thumb back and forth. Mike kissed the top of her head and lightly rubbed his hand on the small of her back.

"I love you so much," he said quietly.

"I love you too, Mike," El replied, closing her eyes. She lay there, breathing in his scent and feeling his heartbeat. Before they knew it, they had both fallen asleep.

"Michael!" El slowly opened her eyes to the sound of her boyfriend's mother calling his name from upstairs. She looked down at Mike still sleeping peacefully beneath her before glancing at the clock which read 3:02.

"Mike," El whispered, gently shaking him awake.

"Hmm?" he breathed, not opening his eyes.

"Mike I think the others are here," El said. When he still didn't start getting up, El shook him a bit harder. After all, she was excited to see the rest of her friends.

"All right, all right, I'm up," Mike said, sitting up to face El. He gave her a peck on the lips and stood from the couch to lead her back upstairs where the front door was just closing, and in the entryway stood Lucas, Max, and Dustin.

"El!" Max exclaimed and jumped at her friend, embracing her in a hug that El happily returned. When Max released her, El turned to greet Lucas and Dustin each with a hug.

"I thought I heard your voices!" Will said from the top of the stairs. He hurried down the remaining stairs and hugged each Lucas, Dustin, and Max. The friends exchanged the normal pleasantries and moved into the living room to place the presents that Dustin, Lucas, and Max had brought under the tree.

"So, when are we doing presents?" Dustin asked.

"Did you want to do before or after dinner?" Mike asked, looking around to see who had preferences.

"Dinner's not for another two hours," Dustin nearly whined.

"So then let's do it before dinner," Mike offered.

"Like right now!" Dustin exclaimed. The gang gathered around the tree, and Dustin started passing out the gifts, claiming the job of Santa himself. He passed everything out at once, so when he was finished, each of them had a small pile of presents in front of them.

"Go!" Dustin exclaimed, and all six of them began tearing into the wrapping paper. As each gift was unwrapped, they would thank each other excitedly and show off their newest gift. Max squealed in joy at the hat and sunglasses that she unwrapped from Will, and Will turned all credit over to El for the purchase of that gift. Lucas held up solid figures of Yoda and Darth Vader and leaned over to kiss Max to thank her for them. Mike was about to open his gift from El, and she kept her eyes glued to his face so she would know if she did a good job.

Under the wrapping paper was a simple cardboard box, and when he opened it, his eyes widened to twice their size and his mouth gaped open.

"El, this is amazing," he said, pulling the Millennium Falcon out of the box.

"Dude," Lucas said, reaching over to touch it, and his hand was met with a swat from Mike. "Hey, I'm not gonna hurt it."

"Seriously, I love it," Mike said to El, ignoring Lucas. He leaned over and kissed his girlfriend. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," El said and she smiled, proud of herself for picking out something that Mike genuinely liked.

"Is that everything?" Max asked, looking around to make sure no one had any presents left unwrapped. El looked at her pile of new gifts and furrowed her brow as she realized she hadn't opened a gift from Mike yet. When she looked up at him, he was looking at her with a smile on his face that told El he knew she had noticed the missing gift.

"There's one more," Mike said. He stood and walked over to the mantle and pulled a small wrapped gift from behind the family photos. "I wanted to save it for last so I could give it to you myself." Mike sat back down next to El and handed her the present. She began unwrapping it and found herself holding a silver box that said Zales on it. She knew Zales was a jewelry store, but she had never had anything from a jewelry store before. El opened the box and her jaw dropped as she looked inside. On the white padding there lay a white gold bracelet with a single diamond in the middle. She felt tears threaten to well up in her eyes, and she noticed that her mouth was still hanging open and she had not spoken.

"Mike-" she started, but she didn't know what to say.

"Do you like it?" Mike asked, and El wondered if he really thought it was possible for her to not like it.

"I love it," she answered. "It is so beautiful."

"Take it out and turn it over," Mike said, and El listened. On the backside of the setting that held the single diamond was a simple engraving: 11/7/1983. El didn't have to ask what it meant; she knew it was the day that she and Mike had first met, the day after Will had gone missing, when Mike along with Dustin and Lucas had stumbled upon her in the rain when she was lost and cold and scared. It was the date Mike had given her his jacket without hesitation and brought her into his home and into his life. It was the date that she had fallen in love with him.

"What's on the back?" Lucas asked curiously.

"The day we met," El answered simply, quietly, still in awe that something like this belonged to her.

"Can I see it?" Max asked, reaching out for the box. After a moment, El nodded, placed the bracelet back into the box and handed it to Max.

"Thank you," El said, placing a deep kiss on Mike's lips.

"Shit, Wheeler, how did you afford this?" Max asked the question everyone was thinking.

"Well, I wanted to get her something special, and I can't have a regular job yet, so I basically had to beg my parents to pay me for things. Like, I would babysit Holly and they would give me twenty bucks, I would do extra chores for my mom and she would pay me. I raked the leaves, I raked the neighbor's leaves. Except one old lady paid me in cookies. That was a waste of time," Mike rolled his eyes.

"Doesn't sound like a waste of time to me! Which house was that?" Dustin asked and Mike chuckled and shook his head.

"Basically I did whatever I could to earn money and I didn't spend any of it for like 2 months. You'd be amazed at what you can afford to buy when you don't spend all your money on comics and video games," Mike said.

"Well, good job," Max said sincerely, making eye contact with the same boy who several months ago she had encouraged El to dump.

Max knew without a doubt now that had been a mistake. Mike smiled and nodded his appreciation.

"Will you put it on me?" El asked.

"Of course," Mike replied, grabbing the box from Max and taking the bracelet out. He fastened the clasp around El's outstretched wrist, and she lifted her wrist to eye level to admire it.

"I don't know how to thank you for this," El said. Mike kissed her and took her other hand in both of his.

"You don't need to," he said. El smiled at him and took in his every feature and knew that she had never been as happy as she was in this moment.

"Do you guys want some privacy?" Lucas joked, bringing Mike and El back to reality, both slightly blushing.

"We still have almost an hour until dinner. Let's go back downstairs," Will suggested. They all stood and headed toward the basement door, Mike and El hanging back slightly so they could share a moment without the others.

"I just want you to know that you mean the world to me. And I had that date engraved because it's the only date that matters to me, because it's when you came in to my life. I love you so much. Merry Christmas, El," Mike said, placing his forehead against hers.

"Merry Christmas, Mike. I love you," El said and closed the gap between their lips once more.

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A/N: Thank you for reading! Please let me know what you thought by leaving a review. I can't wait to continue with this story!

5. Chapter 5

A/N: I know it has been almost an entire week since I have updated this story, but great news: I bought a new laptop, so it will be much easier for me to post for frequently! This is super exciting for me of course because I have so many story ideas, and now I have the ability to work on them. Thank you all for being patient with me and for reading this story. I hope you enjoy chapter 5!

Exploding Helmets: I agree! I am really hoping for season 4 to take place over Christmas so we can see a real Mileven Christmas. It's really my only request.

Grievesforyou: Thank you so much!

Ishiptoast: Aww thank you! I appreciate it.

39CluesStrangerThingsFan-Star: Exactly. It absolutely lives up to the hype! And thank you!

Disneyprincess315: Thank you so much. I am glad you are enjoying it! I wanted the presents to be realistic, and honestly I can definitely see Mike working his butt off to get Eleven something nice like that. I want a Christmas episode with them so badly!

Disclaimer: I do not own Stranger Things or any of its characters.

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That evening, everyone was seated around the table in the Wheelers' dining room. El couldn't believe her eyes as Mrs. Wheeler kept placing dish after dish in the middle of the table. She had never seen so much food before for one meal. There were dishes of yams, green bean casserole, mashed potatoes, scalloped corn, deviled eggs, and biscuits all surrounding a giant ham in the center. The scents together created a mouth-watering aroma, and El was suddenly okay with the fact that she had barely eaten anything earlier in the day.

"You guys have ham for Christmas?" Will leaned in to ask Mike quietly.

"Yeah, my grandpa didn't like turkey or goose, so my family always made ham instead. After he passed away, we've just kind of kept it going," Mike explained. "That's also why, if you ever come here for Thanksgiving, we have both a turkey and a ham."

"All right, dig in," Karen Wheeler said as she sat down across from her son, in between her husband and youngest daughter. The dishes were passed around as the teenagers eagerly filled their plates. Karen waited until all the older kids had made their plates before making one for Holly and then herself.

"Mmm, this is delicious, Mrs. Wheeler," Max moaned, taking her first bite of yams. The others echoed her sentiments as they began to devour the feast in front of them. El had never had yams or scalloped corn before. She had had mashed potatoes, of course, but she found that she actually liked the sweet taste of the yams better than regular mashed potatoes.

"So how was everyone's Christmas?" Karen asked the teenagers.

"It was awesome," Lucas answered. "My parents got me a Nintendo *and* that brand new Super Mario Brothers game."

"You sound like such a child," Max joked, nudging his elbow with her own.

"El, that's a very pretty bracelet. Did Mrs. Byers get that for you?" Karen asked, slightly confused because it didn't seem like something a woman would get for her newly-taken-in daughter.

"No," El answered slowly. She looked at Mike out of the corner of her eye and saw him turn a light shade of pink. He hadn't shown his parents.

"Then who did?" Karen pressed on. Mike felt the eyes of all of his friends on him and his cheeks burned red. He was about to blurt out that it was from him when El finally spoke up.

"It's from Mike," El answered. Karen gasped in surprise and delight.

"Mike? My *son* Mike?" Karen turned her attention to her middle child. "Well now I know why you were suddenly so interested in watching your little sister and doing housework."

"Yeah, well," Mike shrugged his shoulders. "It's our first Christmas together, so I wanted to get her something nice." Karen smiled fondly, impressed by the young man she was raising.

"Can I see it?" Nancy asked. El instinctively glanced at Mike as if to see if he was okay with it, and after he gave a subtle nod, she unclasped the bracelet and passed it down the table to Nancy.

"Wow, this is really nice," Nancy said, admiring the piece of jewelry she was holding. She turned it over, and Mike saw that Nancy noticed the engraving. He could tell by the small smile that she understood what it meant, and Nancy passed it back to El.

"Ellie, I see?" Holly piped up from next to her mother. Mike quickly shook his head, and El opened her mouth to speak but Karen beat her to it.

"Honey, when El puts it back on, you can look at it but no touching," she said. Karen looked up at El to add, "The last thing we need is the first nice thing Mike bought for a girl to be covered in potatoes." El chuckled and Mike fastened the bracelet back around her wrist. El knew that the real reason Mike hadn't wanted the bracelet passed around too much is that he didn't want his parents to see the 11/7/1983 engraving because he wouldn't know how to explain it to them, considering his parents believed they had only met the year prior. Everyone continued eating their dinner and sharing what they had gotten for Christmas, until eventually everyone had cleaned their plates.

"Nancy, why don't you help me clear the table, and I'll grab the pies," Karen asked of her eldest who had finished eating several minutes ago and was rubbing her leg against Jonathan's under the table.

"Sure, Mom," Nancy agreed, standing to help her mother gather all the used dishes.

"That was so good, Mrs. Wheeler. I don't know if I can eat another

bite," Dustin said, leaning back in his chair and putting both hands on his belly.

"I think this may change your mind," Karen said with a smile as she placed both an apple pie and a pumpkin pie on the table along with a tub of whipped cream. The pies were still steaming as if fresh out of the oven, and Dustin had to swallow immediately from how quickly his mouth began to water.

"Okay, you've convinced me," he said, reaching for a dessert plate while Karen began to cut the pies. Everyone took either a piece of apple or pumpkin pie and passed around the whipped cream. El remembered how she and Hopper used to cover Eggos in whipped cream, and she placed a scoop on her pumpkin pie with a sad smile on her face.

"So what are your plans for the rest of Christmas break?" Karen asked, looking back and forth between Nancy and Mike.

"Well there's a New Years Eve party at Jill's that Jonathan and I will probably go to," Nancy replied, and Will could tell by the surprised look in his brother's eyes that this was the first he had heard of this New Years Eve party.

"What party?" he asked. "And who is Jill?"

"Jill was in my history class. She and I became pretty good friends over the last year," Nancy replied. "I've talked to you about her before." Jonathan shrugged, the name still not ringing a bell, and still unsure about the party, as he had been hoping to spend New Years more privately with Nancy.

"What about you all?" Karen asked, looking around at her son and his friends. Mike didn't know where to start. The truth was, he had thought so long about everything he wanted to do with El while she was in town. Ice skating, sledding, movies, even bake Christmas cookies with her if she wanted. He wanted to fill El's first real Christmas with as many traditional Christmas activities as possible. He wanted her to understand why this was the most wonderful time of the year.

"I was thinking we could go ice skating at some point. I think it would be fun to go as a group," Max suggested. Mike was slightly surprised; he hadn't discussed any of this with Max.

"I don't know," Will said, looking down at his apple pie.

"Why not?" Mike asked.

"I'm not exactly the most graceful person," Will answered.

"So? No one's expecting you to be a pro. Come on, Max is right, it will be fun," Mike said reassuringly, patting his friend's shoulder.

"Well, I'm sure you'll find plenty of things to do," Karen said. She rose to collect the empty dessert plates and began clearing the dining room table again.

"Thanks for dinner, Mom. It was great," Mike said, standing from the table as his friends did the same.

"Fantastic," Dustin added. The gang started back toward the stairs to the basement, but Karen's voice rang from the dining room one last time.

"Hey, Mike?" she called.

"Yeah, Mom?"

"Why don't you take El's bag up to your room where she'll be staying and take Will's downstairs with you? They've been sitting by the front door all afternoon," Karen said. Mike sighed deeply and did what he was told. A moment later he joined his friends back down in the basement.

"So we're sleeping down here?" Will asked after Mike took a seat next to El on the couch and draped his arm over her shoulders.

"Well you and I are. El gets my room," Mike replied. El cuddled up closer to Mike's side, feeling a bit sad. She had been looking forward to a whole week and a half of falling asleep in Mike's arms, hearing him breathe and feeling his heartbeat while he still slept. She didn't want to sleep alone in his room while he slept two levels below her

on a pullout couch.

"Where's Jonathan sleeping?" Will asked.

"With Nancy," Mike replied bitterly. "Because they're over eighteen, or whatever," he explained while rolling his eyes when he saw the looks of confusion from his friends.

"Exactly, they're older. Your parents should be more worried about them than you and El," Lucas said logically. El furrowed her brow at this last comment, but no one noticed.

"Just tell your mom that you and El aren't going to *do* anything," Dustin suggested as if it were obvious.

"Do anything?" El repeated, finally voicing her confusion with what everyone was hinting around. Mike's cheeks turned pink and he ran his free hand nervously through his hair.

"Exactly," Lucas smirked, nodding toward El as if the point had been made. Dustin was the only one who found it funny.

"She knows what sex is, Lucas. She just doesn't know how your pervy mind works," Max said exasperated, smacking her boyfriend in the arm. Max turned to explain to El what the boys were uncomfortable saying. "He means Mike should tell his mom that you guys aren't going to do anything sexually. Which, whether that's true or not, is a stupid plan."

"Why is it a stupid plan?" Dustin asked defensively.

"Because, dipshit, who walks up to their mother and says 'Hey Mom, you should totally let me sleep with my girlfriend. It's okay, we won't have sex,'" Max said mockingly. "You guys are just going to have to deal with the sleeping arrangements and spend time together during the day."

"Exactly," Will chimed in, a hint of annoyance in his voice. "So can we stop talking about sex now, and actually do something fun?" El looked over at Mike who she could tell was still embarrassed by the turn this conversation had taken. She squeezed his hand, and Mike looked at her from the corner of his eye and snuck a small smile.

"So ice skating," he finally spoke. "I think it's a great idea."

"Yeah that could be fun," Dustin agreed.

"We could go tomorrow afternoon," Max suggested, her eyes lightly up in excitement.

"Sure. Do you just want to meet over here around noon?" Mike asked. His friends agreed, and shortly after, Max looked at her watch and realized she had just enough time to get back home before her curfew her parents had set for the evening.

"I have to go," she said, standing.

"I'll go with you," Lucas offered, standing up and taking his girlfriend's hand. Dustin followed suit shortly after, and soon Mike, El, and Will were alone in the basement again. They put in a movie and watched in silence until Will stood up at the end to excuse himself to go shower.

"Mike, why did you get so embarrassed earlier?" El asked. Mike sighed; he had hoped this conversation would not reappear.

"I wasn't embarrassed," he began. "I guess just uncomfortable. I don't know. They were making jokes about things they know nothing about and stuff that's none of their business."

"Well, they were right. It's not like we would *do* anything," El said, and Mike chuckled at her imitation of Dustin's inflection on the word 'do.' "I just want to be close to you and spend time with just the two of us. And it's hard during the day because I want to see the others, and Will wants to see you too."

"I know," Mike said, completely understanding where she was coming from because he felt the same way. "Well, you're having a day some time while you're here for just you and Max to hang out, right?"

"Yes," El replied, remembering her promise to Will that she would spend a day with Max so Will could spend a day with just the boys.

"Well then we'll have a whole day for just me and you at some point too," Mike said. "Will can hang out with the others. They'll just have

to understand that we need one day." El nodded and smiled in response before laying her head down on Mike's shoulder. They sat in silence for a few moments before El spoke up again with another question.

"Mike, what is New Years Eve?" she asked. Mike didn't respond right away; he was shocked that El didn't know what New Years was. Sure, she had grown up in a lab. He was certain she had never celebrated New Years; but was the idea of years going by something that she had never known about? Had Hopper not had any sort of celebration with her?

"It's when the current year ends and the next one begins," Mike explained. "So at midnight on December 31, which is New Years Eve, it becomes the next year, 1986."

"What do people do for New Years Eve?" El asked.

"Well, some people go to parties like Nancy," Mike said. "We all just usually hang out, play some games, and watch the New Years special hosted by this guy named Dick Clark until the ball drops in Times Square." El was silent, completely confused by so many words in that sentence. Dick Clark? Ball? Times Square?

"What ball?" she started.

"It sounds crazy, I know," Mike said. "But there is this place called Times Square in New York City, which is a huge city really far away from us. On New Years Eve, this giant ball starts slowly dropping down this pole, and when it reaches the bottom, it is exactly midnight. Everyone screams 'Happy New Year,' and then you kiss."

"Kiss?" El asked, raising her eyebrows.

"Yeah, it's like..." Mike sighed again. He had never had to explain things like national holidays before. "They say that you're supposed to kiss the person you love at midnight on New Years so you can start the year out with a kiss. I don't know if it's supposed to be good luck or whatever, it's just what people do." El nodded along as he spoke. She loved how clearly he tried explaining things to her, even when she could tell he didn't think he was doing a good job of it.

"Have you ever had a New Years kiss?" she asked. Mike shook his head.

"No. You know you're the only girl I've ever kissed," he reminded her. El smiled, happy with his answer, and laid her head back down on his shoulder.

"New Years sounds fun," she said finally, and she meant it. She was excited to experience yet another holiday tradition. Just then, Will came back downstairs, having showered and prepared for bed.

"Guess we should get ready for bed too," Mike said, nudging El who had started to doze off on his shoulder. She stood and went upstairs to shower. After El, Mike showered and changed his clothes. When he opened the bathroom door, El was standing waiting for him in the open doorway of his bedroom. She smiled and gestured him over to her with her finger, and Mike happily listened. He stepped into his bedroom which was still dark with the lights turned off. He turned to face El as she closed the door, and El put both her hands on either side of Mike's face and kissed his lips passionately. Mike let El take control, and she turned them so that Mike's back was against the closed door. El tangled both her hands in Mike's hair that was still damp from the shower, and Mike placed both of his hands on El's back, pulling her even closer into himself. After a few minutes of passion, El slowly pulled back and Mike placed his forehead against hers.

"What was that for?" he asked her quietly.

"I just wanted to say good night," El replied innocently, smiling before leaning in for another kiss.

"I wish I could stay here with you," Mike whispered.

"So do I," El breathed in return. Mike cupped the side of her face with one hand and gently ran his other hand up and down the length of her back which brought chills all throughout El's body. He leaned in for one more soft kiss.

"I have to go downstairs now," he said lowly. "My parents would kill me." El nodded her understanding and stepped back so Mike could

open the door to leave the room.

"Sleep well. I love you," she said, squeezing his hand as he stepped into the hall.

"I love you too. I'll see you in the morning," Mike replied, lifting her hand to his lips for a kiss before walking downstairs to head back to the basement. When Mike reached the basement, he saw Will already asleep on the pullout couch. Mike looked around and grabbed a couple extra pillows and blankets and climbed into the reconstructed blanket fort that El had slept in during that week over two years ago. He pulled a blanket all the way up to his chin and quickly fell asleep.

Upstairs, El was laying on her back in Mike's bed staring straight up at the ceiling. She watched the shadows dancing on the walls and couldn't help but realize how ominous they felt to her. El shook her head and closed her eyes tightly, pulling Mike's comforter tightly around her body and turning onto her side so she could bury the side of her face in Mike's pillow. She breathed in deeply; his bed smelled just like him. El tried to be comforted by that, but it wouldn't work. This room was too dark and too unfamiliar, and even though everything in it reminded her of Mike, she knew she would not be able to sleep in there alone. El quietly made her way from Mike's bed to the door, opening it slowly and holding her breath, hoping Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler were not light sleepers. She crept down the stairs and finally felt her hand on the door leading to the basement. El walked slowly down the basement stairs, hoping none of the stairs would creak and awaken Will. When she reached the bottom of the stairs, El immediately recognized Will sleeping on the pullout couch and turned her head around the basement looking for where Mike was sleeping. She walked slowly past the pullout and followed the sound of her boyfriend's breathing to the blanket fort. El knelt to the ground next to Mike and smiled, looking at him sleeping peacefully in what she considered to have been her first home. El placed one hand on either side of Mike to balance herself as she tried to quietly move her body over top of his so she could sleep on his other side, between him and the back wall of the blanket fort. As she was hovering over him, about to make it to the other side, Mike felt someone there and jerked half awake, the jump causing El to fall straight down on top of him.

"What the-" Mike began to sit up with El on top of him.

"It's just me! It's just me!" El whispered frantically, hoping Will wouldn't wake up. El felt Mike's breathing begin to calm beneath her.

"El?" he whispered. Mike felt her nod her head against his chest. "What are you doing down here?"

"I couldn't sleep," El whispered simply.

"I'm sorry, baby," Mike whispered sleepily and wrapped his arms tightly around her. El smiled warmly at the sound of him calling her 'baby.' He rarely used that word; only in their most intimate and personal moments.

"Let me sleep down here," El said softly, brushing Mike's hair back from his forehead and kissing him lightly on the cheek.

"But my parents-" Mike started quietly, but El placed a finger over his lips to shush him.

"I'll make sure to get up early and sneak back to your room before they get up," she assured him. Mike nodded, too tired to argue or care about what his parents might say. El watched Mike's eyelids fall shut and felt his breathing grow slower and steady, knowing he had quickly fallen back asleep. El snuggled closer to him, her face in his chest so she could breathe in the smell of his t-shirt, and pulled the blanket tight around both of them. Soon she was able to drift off into a slumber with Mike's arms around her, just how she belonged.

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A/N: I hope you all enjoyed this chapter! I will post more tomorrow. Until then, please let me know what you're thinking in the reviews!

6. Chapter 6

A/N: Thank you all for reading and reviewing so far. After reading your feedback, I am really glad I decided to write the Christmas break chapters. When I first had the idea for the story, I had planned to move straight from Thanksgiving into the action, but I reworked my outline to include the Christmas visit, and you all have shown me that was the right decision. That also means this is shaping up to be quite a lengthy story, so I hope you all keep coming back! Enjoy chapter 6!

CaptainRex12: Thank you! I am really glad you liked it.

El Henderson: Thank you, I appreciate it!

Dr. Vorlon: Ask and you shall receive!

39CluesStrangerThingsFan-Star: Thank you! I love them too. I need more Mileven scenes in season 4. A whole season with them in the same city and not broken up or fighting would be ideal.

Grievesforyou: Thank you! I am glad you like it. We will have to see!

JayneFawn: Thank you so much!

Disclaimer: I do not own Stranger Things or any of its characters.

0-0-0

Mike woke up to Will not so gently shaking his shoulder. He opened his eyes and tried to adjust his vision to focus on his friend in the still dark basement. Mike tried to move his right arm but couldn't, and he saw that El was curled up next to him still sleeping and his arm was under her.

"Are you insane?" Will whispered sharply.

"Wha... What?" Mike asked groggily.

"Why is El down here?" Will demanded, gesturing to his new sister who slept peacefully.

"She... she couldn't sleep," Mike remembered, rubbing his eyes with his left hand that was free. "What time is it?"

"Almost six o'clock. Doesn't your dad get up at 6:30?" Will asked, not trying to hide his disapproval. Mike nodded in response. "Then get her out of here. I don't want to be here when your parents kill you. Or worse, I don't want them to send El and me home early and cut the trip short because you two couldn't follow one rule."

"Okay, okay. Chill," Mike said, rolling his eyes. Will got up from the floor where he had knelt next to Mike and walked across the basement to the bathroom and closed the door. Mike shifted onto his right side to face El and studied her face while she slept. She was completely at peace, her small frame moving up and down with each slow breath that she took. Mike looked to her lips which were almost formed into a small smile. Maybe she was having a good dream for a change. Feeling guilty for disrupting her peaceful slumber, Mike leaned his face closer to hers to connect their lips for a soft kiss. He swept her hair off of her face and watched as her eyelashes began to flutter. Mike waited for her to wake up and watched her blink her eyelids several times, trying to adjust to the small amount of light that was starting to shine in from the window, casting a dim glow around the otherwise dark basement.

"Good morning," Mike said and kissed the tip of her nose. El smiled and a small giggle escaped her lips before she rolled forward against him, causing Mike to roll over onto his back and El propped herself up to look at him, resting her right hand on his chest.

"Good morning," she replied. "What time is it?"

"Six," Mike sighed. "You need to get back upstairs." El nodded, remembering her plan from the night before. She began to stand up, but Mike took her arms and pulled her directly on top of him, their faces lined up perfectly.

"Mike-" El started to object, but she couldn't hide the smile on her face.

"A minute or two won't hurt anything," Mike said, placing a hand on the back on El's head and pulling her into another kiss. El parted her lips and slipped her tongue into her boyfriend's mouth while Mike's hand that was placed on El's back moved slowly downward until his fingertips found the hem of her t-shirt. He slipped his hand just under the shirt to rest his hand on the small of her back. El let out a small groan as Mike rubbed his thumb back and forth, feeling how warm and smooth her bare skin was. El slowly moved her kisses from Mike's mouth to the side of his neck, and Mike let out a moan as El gently sucked in his skin. He felt shivers run through his entire body as El exhaled and started moving her mouth back toward Mike's lips.

"Seriously, guys?" Will exclaimed from the doorway of the bathroom. Mike and El were both startled, having forgotten Will was even there, and El hopped up to her feet, blushing bright red.

"Will! I, uh-"

"She was just heading upstairs," Mike provided, nodding at El to hurry upstairs. El avoided eye contact with Will as she straightened her t-shirt and ran up the stairs. Will did not move from the doorway in the bathroom until he heard the door at the top of the stairs close.

"Is this how it's going to be this whole trip? Because I did not come here to see you suck face with my sister," Will said angrily, walking back to the pullout couch he had slept on and turning on the light.

"Well you weren't supposed to see it," Mike mumbled, the pink in his cheeks dying down from the embarrassment of being caught.

"Well you weren't supposed to be doing it," Will retorted.

"What is your problem?" Mike demanded. "I'm sorry you saw me making out with my girlfriend, but you're overreacting."

"Just forget it," Will spat, laying back down and pulling the blanket up to his chest.

"No, we're not doing that again," Mike said, walking toward him and remembering the last time he and Will had fought about Mike spending time with El. "If you have a problem, just say it."

"I just think it's a little ridiculous that you guys are making such a big deal about having to sleep in separate rooms. El sneaking down here to sleep for a few hours and sneak back upstairs, you shoving your tongue down her throat any chance you get. I shouldn't have to worry about seeing you two all over each other any time I turn a corner or enter a room. It's just annoying," Will explained as calmly as he could, but he knew he was unable to hide his frustration.

"No, your attitude is what's annoying," Mike spat back. "We're not hurting anyone; we're still hanging out with you guys during the day. You couldn't have thought that El and I weren't going to want any alone time. This is only the second time I've seen her in the past two months."

"I know!" Will yelled, taking Mike aback. The two of them were quiet for a moment, neither of them wanting to say anything that they would regret. Eventually, Mike let out a loud sigh and sat on the pullout couch next to Will.

"Look, I don't want to fight about this again. It's so stupid. Can we please just try to all have a fun time while you and El are here, and I promise to be more.... considerate when El and I are wanting to be... alone," Mike stumbled through his truce offering. Will looked up at him and let out what sounded like a defeated sigh. His friends were all he had left to connect him to a time before demogorgons and mind flayers existed in his life. Will knew he was clinging to a time that no longer existed, a time that Mike, Lucas, and Dustin had all moved on from. They would never understand what was taken from him, and Will knew he had to accept that. There was no point trying to explain it because he knew he would just appear as the jealous friend who doesn't want to grow up and can't get a girlfriend and gives his friends shit for doing just that.

"Deal," Will said simply. He rolled over away from Mike and closed his eyes, trying to get a couple more hours of sleep.

At nine o'clock, Mike and Will arose from the basement and found El, Jonathan, and Nancy sitting in the living room talking.

"Well rise and shine, sleepy heads," Jonathan teased as the two boys entered the room.

"Mom was waiting until you two woke up to start breakfast," Nancy said as Will and Mike joined them, Mike planting a kiss on the top of El's head.

"You sleep okay?" he asked her with a smirk.

"Never better," El smiled. "How did you sleep?"

"Can't complain," Mike answered, shrugging his shoulders and winking at her as he leaned in to kiss her on the cheek. Nancy noticed Will roll his eyes at the display, and when she looked questioningly at Jonathan, he subtly shook his head to tell her not to ask.

"So what are you guys up to today?" Nancy asked instead.

"Ice skating," Mike said. "Everyone will be here around noon."

"That'll be fun! El, have you ever been ice skating before?" Nancy asked excitedly.

"No," El replied, shaking her head.

"It's so much fun. You'll love it! Don't try to start off too fast, and don't worry about falling down. Everyone does it," Nancy assured her.

"Is it hard?" El asked. She hadn't really thought much into the act of ice skating itself. She had just seen how excited her friends were to go, and she always enjoyed experiencing new things with them.

"It's not really hard. You just need to be able to keep your balance. You'll catch on quick. Promise," Mike said, giving El's shoulder a squeeze. The five of them talked a bit longer in the living room until Karen called them to the kitchen for breakfast. After breakfast, they started getting ready for the day so they could leave once the others got there, and just before the clock struck noon, Lucas, Max, and Dustin appeared on the front doorstep.

"Do you kids want a ride?" Karen offered.

"No thanks, Mom. We'll just take our bikes. There's practically no snow out there," Mike replied. It was true; for being late December,

the winter had been quite tame. There was a light dusting of snow on the ground, but it wasn't even thick enough to cover the grass, and there was no ice on the streets or sidewalks. Mike, Lucas, Dustin, and Max got on their bikes, Will on the back of Dustin's and El on the back of Mike's since neither of them had bikes in Hawkins, and they were off to the ice skating rink.

Ten minutes later, they parked their bicycles outside the rink and everyone went inside to get their skates. El looked around at all the people; there were couples skating together holding hands, families with small children teaching them how to skate for the first time, people of all ages having fun together. El couldn't help the sense of sadness she felt as Hopper crossed her mind. Had he taken his little girl ice skating before she got sick? Would he have taken El? She knew that a year ago at this time, the answer would have been no, as there were way too many people. But, El often found herself wondering what new experiences she would have had with Hopper if he had made it out of the mall that night.

"El, are you okay?" Mike asked quietly, squeezing her hand and bringing her out of her thoughts.

"Yeah, there's just so many people," she replied.

"Is that okay? Is this too much at once?" Mike asked.

"No, no," El said, smiling to reassure him "Everything is okay. What do we do now?"

"Well, here are your skates," Mike handed her a pair in her size. They all changed out of their shoes and into the ice skates, ready to make their way to the edge of the rink.

"Later, stalker," Max said with a wink at Lucas as she hopped onto the rink and quickly skated away, spinning around and continuing backward while sticking her tongue out at him.

"Show off," Lucas muttered, shaking his head with a smile on his face. He, Dustin, and Will stepped onto the ice, and Max rejoined them shortly after making a complete lap around. Mike was the last to step onto the ice and turned to face El, taking her hand in his.

"Just step down slowly," he said. El started to feel a little embarrassed by all her friends watching her. She held Mike's hand tightly and stepped down onto the ice, instantly slipping, and Max grabbed her other hand to help balance her.

"Okay, now slowly shift your feet forward one at a time," Mike said. He was holding on to one of El's hands while Max held the other, and the two of them moved slowly forward with El as she moved her feet how she was told.

"You're doing it!" Max exclaimed, squeezing her best friend's hand. El smiled and kept focusing on moving her feet and keeping her balance.

"See, it's not so bad, is it?" Mike asked. El shook her head in response. She slowly released her grip on Max's hand, but Max stayed by El's side just in case she needed to catch her again.

"You're a natural! You're already probably better than Lucas," Max teased.

"All right, let's race!" Lucas challenged his girlfriend. "You, me, right now. One lap."

"You're on!" Max exclaimed and took off, Lucas tailing her and shouting something about the race not being fair.

El lifted her head up to look around instead of watching her feet. She saw Will and Dustin on the other side of the rink skating next to each other and talking. One couple ahead of them were skating hand-in-hand, and the man spun the woman around in a full circle before wrapping her in his arms to give her a kiss. El smiled and squeezed the hand of her boyfriend, wondering if she would ever be good enough at this ice skating to spin and twirl like that.

"I smoked your ass!" Max said excitedly, turning to point at Lucas when she had caught back up with Mike and El, thus completing the race.

"Yeah because you cheated!" Lucas accused her.

"Don't be a sore loser," Max joked, and Lucas smiled and shook his

head before grabbing Max's hands and pulling her toward himself to place a kiss on her lips.

"How are you doing, El? Are you getting the hang of it?" Dustin asked as he and Will rejoined the group.

"Yeah, I think so," El replied. The six of them continued skating for another hour and a half. By the time they were ready to exit the rink, El was able to keep up with Mike, Will, and Dustin. Max and Lucas had had another couple of races, and Max won each time. As they were leaving the skating rink, all six in good spirits after a fun afternoon, El saw a familiar face walking toward the skating rink through the parking lot. She knew she recognized him, but she couldn't place from where.

"Are you kidding me," Will said under his breath, seeing the same person as El.

"Well look who we have here," Troy sneered, approaching the group. "Zombie Boy returns to Hawkins."

"Back off, Troy," Mike said defensively. Troy turned his attention to Mike and cracked his knuckles, trying to appear intimidating.

"Are you gonna make me?" Troy said, shoving Mike backward. El immediately felt her blood start to boil at the sight of this bully touching Mike. She instantly knew where she had first seen this boy; this is the guy who made Mike jump off a cliff more than two years ago. Mike would have died if she hadn't been there to save him.

"We don't want any trouble. We were just leaving," Dustin joined in, taking a step forward and pointing toward their bikes.

"Did it look like I was talking to you, toothless?" Troy spat. Just then, Troy raised his arm to flag down his friend who he had been meeting at the skating rink, and his friend came to join. "Hey James, look who I just ran in to."

"Zombie Boy, I didn't know you were coming back to town," James sneered and reached his hand out toward Will.

"Leave him alone," Mike demanded, knocking James' arm away from

Will.

"You don't want to do that, Wheeler," James glared, stepping closer to Mike. El instinctively took a step forward and was standing directly next to her boyfriend. She felt her stomach turn, knowing that if either of these guys did anything, El didn't have her powers to save Mike like she did before.

"What are you looking at?" James asked, glaring at El after she had taken a step closer. "Wait, oh shit." James looked El up and down, realizing where he had recognized her from.

"You're the freak that broke my arm!" Troy yelled, his face turning red from anger at the memory and pointing at El. "You here to save your little boyfriend again?"

"Hey man, maybe we should go. She broke your arm with her mind. Who knows what else she can do," James nearly begged Troy who looked at him in disgust for wanting to run away from a girl.

"I don't think she can do anything. I think if she still could, she would have by now," Troy said, inching closer toward El. She could feel her heartrate increasing and kept her eyes locked on Troy, focusing and trying to muster up any remnants of her powers that may be able to help herself and her friends. "No, I think it's time to teach this bitch a lesson." Troy, who was still pointing at El, jabbed his finger hard into her shoulder as he said the word 'lesson.'

"Hey!" Mike yelled and shoved Troy backward. "You don't touch her, you son of a bitch!" Mike swung his right arm forward and felt his fist connect with Troy's nose. Troy doubled over in pain, clutching his face which had started spewing blood. He looked up and locked eyes with Mike, and Mike saw nothing but hate in the glare he was on the receiving end of. Troy wiped blood from his face with the back of his hand and spit some blood onto the ground. Mike was frozen where he stood, in disbelief of what he had just done, and waiting for Troy to make his move. Just as Troy began to lunge forward, the door to the skating rink opened and the manager stepped outside.

"Hey! Is there a problem here?" he asked roughly. Troy halted himself and wiped the new blood from his face.

"No, sir, we were just leaving," Dustin answered.

"That's probably for the best. We don't need that type of behavior here," the manager said sternly. His stance told the teenagers that he was not planning on going back inside until they had all left.

"This isn't over," Troy muttered threateningly to Mike as he and James turned to walk back in the direction they had come from. When Troy and James' cars had disappeared from view, the six of them hopped on to their bikes and rode in silence back to Mike's house. They rode around to the back so they could enter immediately into the basement, not wanting to have to answer Karen's questions about why her son's hand was bloody.

"I'll go get you some ice," Max offered once they were inside. Mike nodded and Max disappeared upstairs. Mike walked over to the bathroom to wash his hand and clean off any blood that was on him, and El followed him inside and closed the door. She immediately wrapped her arms around Mike's neck and pulled him into a tight hug, burying her face in his shoulder.

"I'm so glad you're okay," she whispered. Mike pulled back, a look of confusion on his face.

"Yeah, I'm fine. He didn't even touch me," Mike said.

"I know," El said, the worry clear behind the tears that had started brimming her eyes. "But if he had, I wouldn't have been able to stop him." Her voice broke, and Mike's stomach dropped as he realized what El was talking about. He hadn't realized how scared El had been, watching him stand before Troy who had tried to literally kill him in the past, completely powerless and unable to protect him if things had gone wrong.

"It's okay. I promise, everything is okay now," Mike said softly, pulling her body against his and kissing the top of her head. El let out a sigh of relief and melted into Mike's arms, closing her eyes. Then, it dawned on her why Mike had punched Troy in the first place. She pulled back and looked her boyfriend in the eyes.

"Did you hit him because of me?" she asked.

"I hit him for what he did to you and said to you," Mike clarified. "I'm not going to let anyone hurt you." El smiled and looked at Mike in adoration for a moment before kissing him.

"Let's get your hand cleaned up now," she said. After washing up, Mike returned to his friends in the basement, followed by El. Max handed him the ice packet she had retrieved from upstairs, which Mike gladly accepted and applied to his right hand which had started to throb.

"Dude," Lucas finally said, breaking the silence. "That was awesome."

"It wasn't anything special. It was just one punch," Mike laughed, trying to brush off the situation.

"No, man, Troy was ready to kill you, and you knocked him out," Lucas said gleefully.

"He's right. It was impressive," Max nodded. "How does your hand feel?"

"It hurts," Mike replied honestly. "But I'll be fine."

"Well I'm glad you're okay, but I've really got to get going. I promised I would be home before dinner," Max said and started toward the door. Lucas and Dustin followed suit, and Will, Mike, and El were alone in the basement once again. El excused herself to the bathroom, and the two boys were left to themselves. Will glanced over at his best friend who was staring at the ice pack on his swollen hand.

"Thanks, by the way," Will said.

"For what?" Mike asked, looking up.

"For today. I mean, I know you hit Troy because he came at Eleven like that, but you were defending me too. I appreciate it," Will said sincerely.

"It's no big deal," Mike shrugged.

"No, it is. You know I've never been able to defend myself against

bullies. So really, thank you," Will repeated.

"You're welcome," Mike replied. Will offered a smile which Mike returned, and both boys felt a sense of relief that their afternoon was ending on a much better foot with each other than their morning had started on.

"So when is El spending the day with Max?" Will asked casually.

"Uh, I think the day after tomorrow," Mike answered.

"Do you want to just kind of take it easy tomorrow and watch the Star Wars movies with El?" Will offered as El was reentering the room. She sat next to Mike who instantly wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

"How does a lazy day tomorrow sound? Just watch movies?" Mike asked her. El nodded her approval.

"Sounds good to me," she said and laid down her head. Will and Mike continued talking, but El simply closed her eyes and listened to the sound of her boyfriend's voice, not paying attention to the words themselves. The last thing she felt before drifting off for a nap was Mike kissing the top of her head, and she fell asleep with a smile on her face.

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A/N: Thank you for reading this far, and I hope you enjoyed this chapter! Leave me a review, and I will have more for you all tomorrow!

7. Chapter 7

A/N: Hello! Welcome to Chapter 7. Unfortunately, this will be my last chapter for a few days, as I will be out of state this weekend. I will try to write some more when I get home Sunday evening or Monday after work, but I make no guarantees until Tuesday. So hopefully this will be enough to hold you over :) Also, for some reason this story does not always accurately show when it was last updated. For example, it currently says Last Updated: Aug 20, but as you know, I posted a chapter yesterday August 21. So, if you are not following the story to receive notifications of a new chapter, please consider doing so to avoid missing a chapter due to incorrect dates showing up on the website.

CaptainRex12: I am so glad you liked it! I agree, he definitely doesn't have the size to win a full-on fight against Troy, but I think based on his personality, if he were to get angry enough he could get in one good punch. It was fun to write, so I am glad you liked it!

Ishiptoast: SAME! I get genuinely angry at the scene in season 1 where he is holding the knife to Dustin's throat.

39CluesStrangerThingsFan-Star: Thank you so much. I am really glad you like it so much and hope you enjoy the next chapter!

Disclaimer: I do not own Stranger Things or any of its characters.

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A couple days later, El was over at Max's house to spend a day without the boys. Her eyes were closed, and almost as if through a tunnel, she heard the distant sound of Max walking over to the television and turning off the movie as the credits started to roll. El forced her heavy eyelids open and saw her friend removing the tape from the VCR before looking back at El with an amused look on her face.

"You know you make noises in your sleep," Max said.

"I do not," El replied defensively. "And I wasn't sleeping."

"Oh really," Max raised her eyebrows and crossed her arms.

"Well, I may have dozed off a couple times," El smiled.

"Duly noted. El does not like Sixteen Candles," Max laughed and tossed the tape onto the armchair before sitting next to El on the couch.

"That isn't it. It's just I watched three movies with Mike and Will yesterday. I need a break from movies," El said in an exasperated tone.

"Well you could've told me no! And we'll wait until tonight to watch the other one I got. It's called Footloose. I think you'll really like it, but you can't sleep during it!" Max explained. "What did you guys watch yesterday anyway?"

"The Star Wars movies... All... three... of... them," El emphasized each word and Max began to laugh, feeling El's pain.

"Been there," Max said. "Lucas had me do the same thing once. Did you hate every minute of it?"

"No, I didn't hate it," El replied. "But they were just so long, and there were three of them. I probably would have liked it better if I watched one at a time on different days."

"That makes sense," Max nodded. "But now you've seen Mike's actual first love, Princess Leia."

"She was really pretty," El said, remembering the princess in the movies and her unique hairstyle.

"And she easily became every guy's fantasy, especially after she wore that stupid golden bikini in Return of the Jedi," Max said, rolling her eyes.

"Fantasy?" El asked, furrowing her brow.

"Like a dream or a wish," Max explained. "Basically at some point in your relationship with Mike you will find yourself rolling your hair up into those stupid buns and wearing a golden bikini like Leia was wearing. Mike's head will all but explode, and you'll literally be bringing his dreams to life." El felt her cheeks burn red at the thought of wearing something like that.

"I don't think so. That is definitely not... me," El said simply, remembering how Max taught her to find clothes that felt like herself several months prior.

"That's the point of acting out a fantasy. To be someone you aren't," Max explained.

"Why would people do that?" El asked curiously. Max chuckled at her friend's innocence.

"So much to learn. I'll explain later," she said. "So what do you want to do today?"

"I don't know," El shrugged and looked out the window. Max followed her gaze and saw the disappointing dusting of snow on the ground.

"I had really hoped there would've been enough snow to go sledding," she said. "I think you would've had a lot of fun."

"There is still time," El pointed out.

"Not much. You leave next weekend," Max said sadly. "What else do you have planned while you're here?"

"I don't know what we're doing tomorrow, but the day after that I am spending the whole day with just Mike. Then the next day is New Years Eve," El remembered. "Are you coming over for New Years Eve?"

"Yes we are!" Max replied, excited for El to experience another new holiday. "I can't wait! What are you and Mike doing alone the day before?"

"I don't know," El laughed. She noticed that she really was not part of much of the planning this trip. "I don't even know if Mike knows yet,

we just know we are spending the day together."

"Hmm," Max pursed her lips in thought. "Do you know what you're going to wear?"

"No," El answered. She never really knew what she was going to wear until the morning when she was getting dressed. "Should I?"

"Well if it's just you and him, you'll probably go on a date of some sort, so you'll want to look nicer than if you were just hanging out with all of us," Max explained. She saw the concern cross El's face as she was thinking about the clothes she brought.

"I don't know if I have anything very nice. I just brought normal clothes," she said.

"We can go shopping!" Max exclaimed. "And if you need help covering the cost, just think of it as a second Christmas present." El was surprised but thankful for Max's offer. She agreed to go to the mall because of how happy it seemed to make Max. Glad to have something to do, Max hopped up and ran to the phone.

"Who are you calling?" El asked.

"Robin," Max answered, dialing the phone number.

"Steve's friend?" El asked, confused. Max nodded as the girl picked up on the other end of the phone line.

"Hi Robin? It's Max," Max said into the receiver. "Are you busy today?... Great! Would you mind picking up El and I from my house and taking us to the mall?... Awesome, you're the best. We'll be ready in fifteen minutes."

"Robin?" El repeated when her friend hung up the phone.

"She works at the video store now, and I rent a lot of movies, so we've been talking a lot more," Max explained. "And since the Starcourt Mall, well, isn't there anymore, the closest mall is a half hour away. We definitely can't bike there, and the bus doesn't run outside of Hawkins, so Robin is going to give us a ride." El nodded her understanding, and the two girls started putting on their shoes

and coats to be ready when Robin arrived to pick them up. Nearly twenty minutes later, Robin pulled up out front and honked the horn to signal for the girls to come out.

"Hey Max. Hi El, how have you been?" Robin asked as Max climbed into the front seat and El got in the back.

"I've had a great trip so far," El replied. "How are you?"

"I'm good! I'm working at Family Video with Steve still. How was your Christmas?" Robin asked. For the next thirty minutes, El, Max, and Robin talked about their respective Christmases; El showed Robin the bracelet Mike had gotten her that she has been wearing every day; Robin showed off the new earrings she was wearing; and they discussed their New Years plans. Before they knew it, Robin was pulling into the mall's parking lot.

"So what are you two shopping for? Forget to get someone a present?" Robin asked as she put her car in park.

"No, El has a date coming up, and she needs something new to wear," Max said, smiling at her friend in the rearview mirror.

"A date?! Aren't you seeing one of Steve's kids? The tall one?" Robin asked.

"Mike," El provided. "He's who the date is with."

"Awww," Robin gushed, causing El to turn pink. "Where are you two going?"

"She doesn't know. So we need to find her something that she could wear just about anywhere that isn't too fancy but also looks nice enough to show she put in some extra effort," Max explained.

"Well good luck," Robin said. "I am not in a clothes shopping mood, so meet me back at that entrance in two hours." Robin pointed to the entrance that Max and El were about to head into. The girls agreed and walked toward the door while Robin drove away. Once inside, Max led El down the main aisle of stores, looking in the windows at the clothes displayed on the mannequins.

"This would be so much easier if I knew what he had planned," Max muttered. "Well it's cold out, so no skirts or dresses, just in case you're spending time outside." El nodded in agreement.

"So pants and, what, a sweater?" El asked, not sure how she was supposed to look any nicer than normal in just pants and a top like she wore all the time.

"Maybe... Here, come with me," Max grabbed El's hand and pulled her into a clothing store. For more than an hour, El was in the dressing room while Max brought her handfuls of clothing to try on. El tried on blouse after blouse, high-waisted pants, several pairs of jeans, and some sweaters. The two girls were not agreeing on any of the outfits, and El was nearly ready to tell Max to forget the whole thing and that she didn't need new clothes to spend the day with Mike, when Max knocked once more on the door of the dressing room.

"I have something for you to try, and I know I said no dresses, but trust me on this one and give it a try," Max called through the door. El opened the door wide enough to accept the clothing through the crack and then held the garments out in front of herself. Max had handed her a simple sleeveless maroon dress and a pair of black leggings. El pulled the leggings on first, having never worn a pair before, and she loved how comfortable they felt. She pulled the dress on over her head; the bodice fit perfectly, just snug enough, and the skirt was more relaxed and flowy and ended two inches above her knees. She looked in the mirror and gaped at how much older she looked.

"Do you have it on?" Max called from outside the door. El opened the door in response and Max gasped. "It's so pretty!"

"Too pretty," El said. "This is fancy."

"It's not that fancy," Max said, shaking her head. "Besides, we can get you a more casual jacket to dress it down a bit." El bit her bottom lip, looking herself up and down in the mirror, and knowing that she needed to buy this outfit.

"You don't think it's too much?" she asked for reassurance.

"Not at all. He's probably taking you to dinner or something, and even if you are outside for a bit, the leggings keep your legs really warm," Max explained. "You won't be overdressed anywhere Mike would take you. It's not like you're going anywhere five-star or anything, realistically." El nodded along, not asking for clarification on what Max meant by 'five-star.'

"Can you find me a jacket so I can see the whole look?" she asked, and Max left instantly to find one. She returned with a black faux leather jacket, and when El put it on, the jacket ended right at her waist where the bodice and skirt met.

"It's like this outfit was made for you," Max said. El nodded, hoping Mike would like it as much as she and Max did. El changed back into her own clothes, and Max bought the outfit for her.

"Okay," Max said when they were outside the clothing store. "Now to find what you'll wear underneath."

"What?" El gasped, taken aback. Max laughed at how innocent El really still was.

"It doesn't matter that no one is going to see it besides you. Knowing that you're wearing a brand new matching bra and panty set makes a world of difference," Max said.

"How?" El asked in confusion.

"It's like you have this whole new sense of confidence in yourself. Plus, a new, never worn bra will make the dress look even better," Max explained.

"So, even though no one will see it, it is still that important?" El asked, still not understanding Max's reasoning. The redhead sighed and crossed her arms.

"Yes. Lucas has never seen anything underneath what you're seeing right now either. But whenever he takes me out on a date, I make sure I am matching underneath. Like I said, you just feel more confident. Trust me on this one," Max said reassuringly. El still thought it sounded ridiculous and did not know how this detail

would make a difference, but Max was not letting the idea go, so she relented and followed her friend to a storefront across the aisle that was glowing pink through the doorway. Max led the way through the store, showing El options which El glanced at with reddening cheeks. She had never been in a store like this. Finally, Max held out a simple black bra with lace covering the fabric on the cups. The cups looked like they were a different cut than the ones she was used to, and they were definitely more squishy, but El took it and followed Max to the dressing room. El told Max that it fit properly, and on their way to the cashier, they selected a pair of matching panties to go with the new undergarment. Back in the main aisle of the mall, El exhaled a breath she did not know she had been holding since they had reached the checkout counter. Max laughed, but she also felt bad for not noticing that El had felt genuinely uncomfortable on that particular quest.

Looking at Max's watch, the girls realized it was time to head home. They met Robin outside when they had promised to, and the half hour ride back to Max's house was spent with Robin and Max introducing El to new music they thought she would enjoy.

Back at Max's, the girls took the containers out of the fridge that Max's mom had left them for dinner and heated up the food. After dinner, Max showed El some more Wonder Woman comics, remembering that El had liked the one that they read over the summer. Max had gotten more for Christmas, and El was fascinated by the strong female character portrayed on the pages. The ended the evening by putting Footloose into the VCR, and El promised she would stay awake for the whole movie. She found that she really enjoyed the movie, and Max pulled her up to make her dance along to the "Footloose" song.

"So did you like it?" Max asked when the movie had ended.

"Yes!" El smiled.

"Way better than Star Wars, wasn't it?" Max asked. El laughed and nodded. She really did like the movie better, but one thing Star Wars had that Footloose didn't was that she had gotten to watch Star Wars cuddled up next to Mike. When El went to bed that night, she imagined herself curled up with him again, and she could almost feel

his arm around her shoulders and the rise and fall of his chest with every breath. Hoping he would like what she picked out that afternoon, El drifted into a peaceful sleep.

Two days later, Mike woke up in his own bed and looked at the clock next to him which read 5:35AM. He thought briefly about going back to sleep, but he knew if he did, he would risk sleeping past 6:30 and his parents catching him leaving his bedroom where El was supposed to be sleeping alone. Mike and El had been taking turns sneaking into the other's bed each night and sneaking back to their own each morning. As far as they could tell, Mike's parents were none the wiser, and Will hadn't given them a hard time about it again since the first morning. Mike watched his girlfriend as she slept, thinking that he could just lay and look at her forever and not get bored. She looked perfect, even with her hair messy, no makeup on, and her mouth hanging partially open in her sleep. Mike reached forward and brushed a strand of El's hair off of her cheek and tucked it behind her ear. She stirred a bit at his touch, and Mike thought he had woken her, but El just snuggled closer to him, not opening her eyes. After a few more minutes, El's eyelids began to flutter, almost as if she had felt that Mike was awake next to her, and she opened her eyes, facing him. Mike smiled and kissed her and rolled onto his back so El could lay her head on his chest and drape her arm over his torso. He knew it was her favorite cuddling position. The two of them lay silently with each other for several minutes before Mike looked at the clock again and noticed that 6:00 was approaching.

"I need to get going," he whispered.

"I wish we didn't have to sneak back and forth like this," El said, squeezing her arm around him.

"It won't be like this forever, and it's better than not being with each other at all," Mike reminded her.

"Speaking of being with each other, what are we doing today?" El asked, remembering that today was the day that was going to be spent just the two of them.

"I don't really have anything planned during the day, but this evening is a surprise. I really hope you like it," Mike replied. El smiled and

looked up at him.

"I'm sure I will love it," she said. "But you do need to get back downstairs." Mike nodded and tossed the covers off of himself to stand, gave El a kiss, and left his bedroom to head back to the basement for another couple hours before starting the day.

Later that day, Mike and El were seated at a booth in a diner that was a short bike ride from Mike's house, eating brunch. El had actually wanted breakfast food that wasn't Eggos, so the two of them were enjoying biscuits and gravy, eggs, and fruit instead. Out the window, El saw one car pass by every couple of minutes. It was nothing like the traffic in the city where she had moved to. Sure, their house was out on a country road, but El experienced the crowds of people daily.

"I miss Hawkins," she said suddenly. Mike reached his hand across the table to give hers a squeeze.

"I know you do," he said.

"Not just you and the others," El said. She immediately clarified when she saw the look of confusion on Mike's face. "I mean, I miss so much about this place. It's so much smaller here. This is the first place I ever lived and had a place that felt like home. The first place I had real friends. It's where I met you, of course. I just feel like I was suddenly given a life when I escaped from the bad men, and just as quickly as I found it, I had to leave it."

"El, you didn't leave anything. If anything, you found another family with Mrs. Byers, Jonathan, and Will," Mike said. El shook her head.

"I think all the time about how life would be if things had gone differently in July. I would still be living in the cabin with Hopper; I could see you whenever I wanted; I could have sleepovers and girls days with Max. We wouldn't have to plan everything around holidays and breaks from school," El explained.

"Yeah, it would've been easier," Mike agreed. "But I guess that's not how it's supposed to be right now. Some day, though, it won't be this hard. Whether it's here in Hawkins or anywhere else in the world, eventually we won't have to plan to see each other around holidays,

and we won't have to sneak back and forth between my bedroom and the basement." El laughed and squeezed his hand in return.

"How do you know that?" she asked.

"Remember the night before I left after I came to see you for Thanksgiving?" Mike asked, and El nodded. "You promised me that I would never lose you. You meant that, didn't you?"

"Of course," El insisted.

"Well all right then. That means you're stuck with me for the long haul," Mike smiled at even the mention of a long future with her. "So sooner or later we'll be together all the time." He hoped she would realize that he meant that eventually the two of them would be married and living together. Mike had come a long way from stammering over the word 'love' in the grocery store back in July, but he still wasn't ready to admit to her that he has pictured the two of them actually married to each other.

"I hope you're right," El replied warmly. She knew she loved Mike, and she knew she wanted the future he was talking about. But given her past, she just couldn't allow herself to get too excited or hopeful for things so many years in the future.

After they had finished eating, Mike paid the bill, and the two of them left. Instead of riding Mike's bike, they decided to walk together, so Mike was walking with his bike while El walked next to him. They ended up walking through the woods, and El looked up at the bare tree branches shielding the sky above. She remembered the days when she lived off the nature in these very woods before Hopper had taken her in. It had been much colder that year than it was today. When they reached through the other side of the trees, El saw the familiar sight of the quarry. They were approaching the cliff that Mike had jumped from and where he, El, and Dustin had reunited more than two years ago. Mike and El walked closer to the edge, and El looked below to see the water still had a current.

"It's normally frozen over by this time of the year," Mike said, looking over the cliff as well. "And usually the trees have iced over, so walking through them is beautiful. I don't know what's going on this

year."

"It's okay," El said. "I've liked the walk. It reminds me of when I used to live here. It's nice to see old familiar places." El sat on a large rock facing out over the water, and Mike laid his bike down and sat on the rock next to her, putting his arm around her shoulders. El leaned backward against him, and Mike rested his chin on top of her head. They stayed there for almost three hours, simply talking, laughing, reminiscing. When Mike looked at his watch and realized they had to get back to his house to get ready for the evening, El was almost sad to be going back in to town. She hopped on the back of his bike and shortly they arrived back at Mike's house.

"Be ready to go at five," Mike said before giving El a kiss and watching her disappear up the stairs.

El pulled the clothing she had bought out of the bags and laid the outfit out on Mike's bed. She stared long and hard at the bra and panty set and considered putting it back in the bag and not wearing it. It's not like Max would ever know. Except, friends don't lie, and she knew Max would ask if El wore everything and if she felt this so-called confidence boost. El sighed and removed the clothes she had been wearing before stepping into the new black panties and fastening the black bra. El looked in the full-length mirror on Mike's closet door, and she nearly kicked herself as a ripple of confidence surged through her body. She shook her head and pulled on her new leggings before pulling the dress over her head. Facing the mirror again, she saw what Max had meant about the dress fitting even better with the new bra.

'She may have been right about this,' El thought to herself. El began to brush her hair and pulled some of it from each side of her face back and clipped it in place in the center of her head with a black hair clip. She then applied some mascara, eyeliner, and lip gloss before slipping on the jacket Max had picked out and standing in front of the mirror to admire her finished look.

"Damn it, Max," El muttered out loud when she saw how good she looked. El looked at the clock next to Mike's bed and saw that it read 4:56PM. She gave herself one last look in the mirror and walked out the door.

Downstairs, Mike was already prepared to leave. He was wearing khaki pants and a dark blue crewneck sweater over top of a lighter blue collared shirt, and he was in the dining room telling his mom their plans for the evening so she knew around what time to be expecting them home. When El reached the landing at the top of the last flight of stairs, Karen gasped and brought her hands up to cover her mouth. Mike was startled by his mother's reaction, and he turned around to see what had caused it. When he saw El standing at the top of the stairs, his mouth dropped open, and his eyes moved up and down the entire length of her body. The dress she was wearing hugged her perfectly in all the right places, and he didn't know why, but she had an extra glow about her. He raised his eyes back up to her face and locked eyes with her as she walked the rest of the way down the stairs. El walked up to her boyfriend who was still unable to speak and smiled sweetly, leaning up to place a kiss on his lips.

"El, you look.... Beautiful doesn't even begin to describe it," Mike said, placing his hands on her waist as he gazed into her eyes.

"Thank you. You look really nice too," she said, causing Mike to blush a bit. He knew he was cleaning up a little better than he usually did, but next to how gorgeous El was, he couldn't help but wonder what he did to deserve this.

"Are you two ready?" Nancy asked, coming in from the living room, hand-in-hand with Jonathan, and El deduced that the two older teenagers would be the transportation for herself and Mike that evening.

Mike and El sat in the back seat of Jonathan's car, holding hands the entire time, Mike tracing circles with his thumb on the back of El's hand. When the car stopped, the four of them entered an Italian restaurant, and at the host stand, Jonathan and Mike each requested a table for two. Mike and El were sat at a small table near the picture window which faced the street. Even though Christmas was several days ago, the street lamps were still wrapped in strands of white Christmas lights and shone brightly as it got darker outside. El stared down the street that ran perpendicular to the restaurant, and with rows of street lamps on both sides, it looked like a neverending tunnel of white Christmas lights.

"The lights are so pretty," she said. Mike smiled and nodded.

"Just wait until you see where we're going after this," he said. El's eyes widened with curiosity and anticipation. She had been expecting that they would just go back home after dinner, which she would have been content with, but she was thrilled by the idea of her evening with Mike continuing.

When they had finished, Mike and El met back up with Nancy and Jonathan at the front of the restaurant and piled back in to Jonathan's car. It was after seven o'clock, and this time of year in Hawkins, Indiana, that meant it was dark outside. El was not able to recognize where they were going, which she was okay with because it added to the anticipation. Jonathan parked the car and told Mike and El to go ahead. He said he and Nancy would wait a bit so they didn't seem like a group of four. Mike silently nodded his appreciation, not wanting to seem like he and El were being chaperoned. When El stepped out of the car and looked in the direction Mike was leading her, she stopped frozen in her tracks. They were at the city park in the next town over where she and Max had gone to the mall a couple days prior. Every street lamp, tree branch, and railing was covered in Christmas lights of every color imaginable, illuminating the dark sky above them.

"What is this?" El asked timidly. Mike took her hand in his tightly.

"I didn't think you'd ever seen a real Christmas lights display," he said.

"But Christmas is over," El said.

"It is, but they keep this up until January. And so what if Christmas is over, I wanted you to experience this while you were here," Mike explained. El looked around, completely in awe.

"It's so beautiful," she said. Mike squeezed her hand and they started walking toward the entrance of the park. Along the path that they followed, the city had set up displays of Christmas lights and decorations such as reindeer, angels, snowmen, Christmas trees. There was a life-size Nativity scene that El recognized from the similar statues she had seen on display at Mike's house. Mike and El

continued hand-in-hand along the walkway, gazing at the displays of Christmas lights. Mike felt the butterflies in his stomach when he glanced El's way and saw how the lights from the display reflected in her eyes and lit up every feature of her face. El saw him staring at her and turned to face him.

"What?" she asked sweetly.

"I just truly can't get over how stunning you look tonight," Mike said, pulling her close to him with one arm around her waist and tilting her chin up toward him with his other hand. "I love you so much." He kissed her lightly, and they let their lips linger for a moment before pulling back and continuing down the illuminated path. Eventually, they saw the end of the path approaching, and El felt a small sense of sadness that the night was about to end. When Mike and El walked back to Jonathan's car to wait for him and Nancy to join them, Mike leaned back against the closed door on the passenger side, and El laid against him, her arms around his waist and her head laying against his chest. Mike held her silently, breathing in the smell of her hair and feeling how full his heart was, knowing he was holding his entire world.

"Did you have a good day today, baby?" Mike asked gently. El did not look up, but squeezed her arms tightly around him.

"It was perfect," she said, and closed her eyes.

0-0-0

A/N: Thank you all again for continuing to read my story. I gave you a bit of a longer chapter since I will not be updating for a few days. I hope you enjoyed it. Please leave me a review and let me know what you're thinking!

8. Chapter 8

A/N: Thank you all so much for reading so far! I hope you all enjoy chapter 8!

39CluesStrangerThingsFan-Star: Aww thank you! I'm glad you like it, and I am glad to be back so I can write more!

Dr. Vorlon: Wouldn't it?! Though maybe inappropriate for this particular story haha

El Henderson: Thank you so much. I really appreciate that!

Grievesforyou: Thank you :)

CaptainRex12: Thank you for those kind words. I try hard to balance between the fluff and an actual story and interactions with other characters. I appreciate the feedback and am glad you like it!

Exploding Helmets: Thank you! I am glad.

Disclaimer: I do not own Stranger Things or any of its characters.

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On the morning of New Years Eve, El walked down the stairs around 8:30 and joined her boyfriend and his mother in the dining room. She stopped behind the chair Mike was sitting in and gave him a hug around his neck, kissing him on the temple.

"Good morning," she said with a smile.

"Good morning. How did you sleep?" Mike asked as El took a seat next to him.

"So good. I was exhausted," El replied. Mike had to stop himself from blushing, as he knew that her exhaustion was due to the steamy makeout session they had stayed up having into the early hours of the morning after returning home from their date. The last time Mike

had remembered seeing on the clock next to his bed was 2:52AM, and El had had to shake him awake to make him go downstairs at 6:15.

"Mike told me all about your night. Did you have a good time?" Karen asked from the other side of the table. El's mouth dropped open, but she did not know what to say. Her mind was still with Mike upstairs six hours prior.

"You don't have to be shy," Mike jumped in after an awkward moment of silence when he realized El and his mother were not on the same page. "I already told her that you'd never been to a lights display like that because your dad wasn't really the Christmas type, and Hopper never got the chance to take you."

"Oh... right," El said, her heart rate returning to normal. "It was beautiful. I had such a great time."

"That's good to hear," Karen smiled as Mike reached under the table to give El's leg a reassuring squeeze. "Also, El, I was just telling Mike that his father and I are going to his company's New Years Eve party tonight, so we will be leaving for the evening around eight o'clock."

"So, wait, why are they having a New Years party?" Mike asked, remembering what his mom had been saying before El had joined.

"Their annual Christmas party was cancelled; I'm not entirely sure why. You know how your dad is with relaying information," Karen rolled her eyes. "So they are hosting a party tonight instead for New Years." Mike nodded but then frowned when he realized what was probably coming next.

"So does that mean..." Mike started, trying not to sound too whiney.

"Would you mind watching Holly for us tonight?" Karen asked. "I would ask Nancy, but she's going over to Jill's with Jonathan, and it is probably too late to get a sitter."

"I mean, my friends are coming over tonight," Mike reminded her. "What am I supposed to do with her?"

"She's a little girl, Michael. She'll fall asleep around her normal

bedtime anyway. Just remember to wake her up before the ball drops so she can ring in the New Year," Karen said.

"Fine," Mike sighed, causing Karen to laugh a bit.

"You know, you were much more cooperative when you were trying to get money out of me for El's Christmas gift," she said before turning to El with a smile on her face. "When is your birthday, dear? I want to know when my son will be helpful around the house again."

"Funny, Mom," Mike rolled his eyes and stood from the table. "We're gonna head downstairs. Will should be up by now." Mike and El entered the basement to find Will propped up on his pillows reading a comic book. Mike and El joined him on the pullout and spent the remainder of the morning reading some of the comics he had brought with him.

Around 7:30 that evening, Mike, El, Will, Max, Lucas, and Dustin were hanging out in the living room while the adults bustled around the house getting ready to leave for their parties. Mike's mood about the evening had improved throughout the day. Even though he had to watch his little sister, he was still blessed with the chance to have an entire night with El without having to worry about sneaking back and forth. The New Years party his parents were going to that was hosted by his dad's work was at a hotel, and the company had reserved a number of rooms so their employees and families were not driving home intoxicated afterward. Karen had told Mike that she and Ted would probably stop somewhere to get breakfast before returning home in the morning.

"Come *on*, Jonathan, stop being so dramatic!" Nancy cried from down the hallway. Jonathan had not kept it a secret that he was less than excited about attending this party.

"I just don't see why we have to spend the whole night with a bunch of people I don't even know," Jonathan said, entering the living room.

"You know me," Nancy said smiling, trying to be sweet, but Jonathan sighed in frustration.

"You'll be drinking, and your friends will be there," he argued.

"So? You can meet some more of my friends. There will be tons of people there that you'll really like," Nancy pressed on.

"Fine, whatever, you win," Jonathan threw his hands up in defeat and walked back out of the living room, leaving Nancy alone, shaking her head. The teenagers in the room all exchanged awkward looks about what they had just witnessed before Nancy finally turned to them, acknowledging them.

"Ugh, this is not how I wanted to start off this night," she said to no one in particular.

"To be fair, I don't think he's trying to be difficult. I just know he was excited to spend the holidays with you," Will said gently. "And you know he doesn't like meeting a bunch of new people. So maybe just take it easy on him." Nancy sighed but said nothing in return, as she knew Will had some valid points.

"Okay, Mike, here's some money so you guys can order pizza for dinner," Karen said, entering the room and handing her son a twenty dollar bill. "Holly will probably fall asleep around nine or 9:30, but please remember to wake her up in time for the ball to drop."

"Okay, Mom," Mike agreed.

"And have her go back to bed right away afterward. I don't need her staying up too late and knocking her whole sleep schedule out of whack," Karen continued.

"Yes, Mom," Mike nodded.

"And your friends are all welcome to sleep here tonight. You and the other boys in the basement, El and Max up in your room. And I'm serious about that; just because your dad and I won't be here doesn't mean there aren't still rules," Karen said firmly, pointing a finger at her son. For a brief moment, a wave of panic went through Mike as he wondered if his parents had figured out that he and El have been breaking the sleeping arrangement rule all along.

"Mom, I promise, I have everything under control," he said.

"Oh I trust you," Karen said, smiling and walking toward Mike with

her arms outstretched. Mike met her for a hug. "Thanks for watching your sister."

"No problem," Mike said, pulling back from his mom. "Have fun tonight."

"I'll see you tomorrow. I love you both," Karen said, stopping to give Nancy a hug as well on her way out of the living room. "Happy New Year!" She called over her shoulder, and the teenagers returned the sentiment. A moment later, they heard the door open and close, signifying that Karen and Ted had left for the night.

"You can bullshit Mom all you want, but I'm not stupid," Nancy said, turning to point at Mike immediately after their parents had left the house.

"What are you talking about?" Mike asked confused.

"I know you're going to sleep in your room with El. Lucas and Max can sleep in my room if they want, but you all better make sure that you're all where you're supposed to be before Mom and Dad get home," Nancy said, looking from her brother and his girlfriend to Lucas and Max on the couch. The four of them nodded, not bothering to argue that she was wrong to assume, because they all knew she wasn't.

"All right, I'm ready to go," Jonathan said, entering the room in black dress pants and a blue button-down dress shirt.

"You all have fun and be safe," Nancy said. "Happy New Year." She and Jonathan left the living room and a moment later left the house as well.

Within the next fifteen minutes, the pizza was ordered and bags of chips and popcorn covered the coffee table in the living room. Holly was playing with some Barbie dolls while Dick Clark's New Year Rockin' Eve played on the television in the background. When there was a knock on the door, Mike took the money his mom had left and returned with two large pizzas and a box of breadsticks. He gave Holly a plate with a slice of pepperoni pizza and a breadstick before letting his friends start tearing into it.

"So I was thinking," Dustin said between bites. "Will you guys come with me tonight to wish Suzie a Happy New Year?"

"Come with you where?" Lucas asked, taking another slice of pizza from the box.

"Cerebro," Dustin said with his mouth full.

"That's disgusting," Max grimaced.

"And you're crazy," Mike added. "Utah is two timezones behind us. You want us to follow you to the top of that hill at 2AM?"

"Well yeah," Dustin answered as if it were obvious. "She really likes you guys from when you've come with me before."

"I am not making that trek at two in the morning," Lucas agreed with Mike. "It is too cold for that, and I'm not spending the whole night out there listening to you and Suzie calling each other your nauseating pet names."

"Hey!" Dustin said defensively. "We're not nauseating. We're just in love."

"No you're not," Max laughed, and Dustin glared at her, offended. "You've only seen each other at camp, and you barely get to talk to each other."

"Yeah well you can love somebody without getting to see them or talk to them all the time," Dustin argued and looked over at Mike and El, his eyes begging them for backup.

"That's true," Mike offered, wanting to stay out of it.

"Even so, believe me, Dusty-Bun, you can be in love without calling each other those ridiculous names," Lucas reiterated. "Back me up here, Mike."

"That's also true," Mike nodded, taking a bite of pizza.

"Whatever," Dustin rolled his eyes. "So none of you want to come wish my girlfriend a Happy New Year?"

"Could we go tomorrow morning or afternoon?" Mike asked, trying to compromise.

"Tell me, Mike, are you going to wait to tell *your* girlfriend Happy New Year until tomorrow?" Dustin asked.

"Well, no, but my girlfriend is here and I'm not asking everyone to go hike up a hill at two in the morning," Mike replied. "Look, why don't you just call her on the phone. That way, you can still talk to her when it's midnight out in Utah, and no one has to go anywhere at 2AM."

"The phone? You're going to let me call Utah from your house?" Dustin asked, disbelief in his tone.

"I would rather explain the long distance charge to my parents than keep arguing about this," Mike said. "Just don't be too long. Tell her Happy New Year and that you miss her or whatever, and tell her you'll call her on Cerebro tomorrow."

"That could work," Dustin nodded. "Thanks."

When the pizzas were gone, Mike took the empty boxes and piled the dirty plates on top of them and walked to the kitchen. El followed him and walked up behind him at the sink, looping her arms around his waist and leaning forward against his back. Mike turned around in her arms so they were face-to-face, and he gave her a kiss on the cheek.

"Sorry there's not much going on right now," he said. "In a couple years we can go to a New Years party or something, but we're way too young to drink right now, so there's really no point."

"It's okay. I like seeing everyone all together," El said. She tilted her head up to meet Mike's lips as he leaned in for a kiss.

"So do I, but I'm more excited to have the whole night to spend with just you," Mike said quietly when their lips had separated.

"Mike," said a small voice from the doorway of the kitchen. Mike and El turned to see Holly standing there rubbing her eyes.

"Hi Holly. Are you tired?" Mike asked and then chuckled when his little sister yawned in response. "I think it might be time for you to go to sleep."

"But, but, I wanna stay up for New Years," Holly protested.

"How about you lay down now, and I'll come get you in time for New Years," Mike offered the previously agreed upon plan from his mother.

"Wake me up? You won't forget?" Holly asked tiredly after another yawn.

"I won't forget. I promise," Mike said and started toward his little sister. He took her hand to lead her up the stairs to get ready for bed. At the top of the first landing, Mike stopped for a moment at Holly's request. Holly leaned against the banister and called for El, and El came to the side of the stairs.

"Ellie, come on," Holly said, waving her arm for El to join them. El smiled and joined Holly and Mike on the stairs, and the three of them continued to Holly's room.

"Okay, grab your pajamas and go to the bathroom to change and brush your teeth," Mike instructed, and Holly went to her dresser to pick out a set of Snow White pajamas. When Holly left to prepare for bed, El looked around the little girl's bedroom at the pink bedding, the dollhouse next to Barbies and baby dolls, the nightlight shaped like a castle plugged in next to the bed. El wondered what her own bedroom would have looked like if it had been in a house instead of a lab.

"Sorry she had to drag you along," Mike said, sitting on the edge of Holly's bed.

"It's okay," El said as she looked at one of the drawings taped to Holly's wall. Holly entered the room having changed into her pajamas and brushed her teeth.

"All ready for bed?" Mike asked and pulled back the comforter and sheet so Holly could crawl in. When she laid down, Mike covered her

up and started tucking her in, and Holly reach up and grabbed his hand to stop him.

"Will you read me a story?" she asked.

"A story?" Mike repeated. "Holly, I'm waking you up again in about two hours."

"So," Holly challenged him and crossed her arms. Mike heard El stifle a laugh behind him.

"All right," he relented. "What story?" He stood from the bed and walked to the bookshelf on the other side of the room. Holly told him which story she wanted to hear, and Mike grabbed the book from the shelf. It was a picture book with a pink and white cover and a picture of a princess, a castle, and a dragon on the front. Mike was certain the majority of Holly's books had a similar concept: princesses, princes, magic, slaying dragons. The usual fairytale components. He carried the book back over to the bed and sat next to his little sister, leaning back against the headboard.

"Ellie, come on," Holly waved El over to the bed.

"If you insist," El smiled.

"Scoot over," Holly said to her brother, pushing Mike's arm. Mike moved over to the side of the bed, and El climbed into the other side, Holly positioned between the two of them. Mike started reading the story, and Holly rested her head on his arm, looking over at the pictures on the pages as he read along. El was hardly listening to the story, but her eyes were fixed on Mike as he read to his sister. The site was so pure, and El felt how full her heart was as the unexpected thought of Mike doing this with their own daughter some day entered and exited her mind in passing.

By the time Mike reached the end of the story, Holly had fallen asleep leaning against him. He placed the book on the nightstand next to her bed and gently moved his sister's head from his arm to her pillow before standing from the bed. El stood to follow him and took his hand as they reached the door. Mike turn off the light before he and El stepped into the hallway and closed the door. Before Mike

was able to take a step toward the stairs, El had wrapped her arms around his neck and placed her lips on his, enveloping him in a quick thirty seconds of passion.

"What was that for?" he asked when El had pulled back.

"No reason," El shrugged and said with a smile. Mike smiled back and placed his forehead against hers as El closed her eyes and took in their moment alone. When Mike suggested that they get back downstairs, El had nearly forgotten that their friends were even there.

"Welcome back," Max said when Max and El returned to the living room.

"Where'd you two go?" Will asked.

"Where do you think?" Dustin laughed before starting to mock his friends by pursing his lips and making smooching sounds. Lucas laughed and joined in until Max slapped his arm.

"Shut up, guys. We were putting Holly to bed for a bit," Mike rolled his eyes. El looked at the game board they were setting up on the floor.

"What is Clue?" she asked. Dustin and Lucas were quick to hide the shock that crossed their faces at El's question, and Max immediately began explaining the game to her. Mike and El joined their friends on the floor around the game board, and Max passed out the clue sheets. For more than an hour, the six of them tried to solve the murder mystery, until finally it was Dustin who made his final accusation.

"I'm accusing Colonel Mustard in the observatory with the pistol," he said before taking the small envelope with the hidden cards and opening it. The smirk on his face revealed what the cards said before he turned them around. "Victory!"

"Just in time, too," Mike said, looking at his watch. It was 11:40PM, so he stood to go wake Holly up.

"Did you like the game?" Max turned to El as the boys put the game pieces back into the box.

"Yeah, it was fun," El replied. "It's nice to know there are games that don't last ten or more hours at a time."

"Oh," Max laughed. "Don't worry, if they ever want to play D&D, you and I will go find literally anything else to do."

"How do you know she meant D&D? That could've just as easily been about Monopoly," Lucas said from behind his girlfriend.

"What's Monopoly?" El asked, furrowing her brow in confusion.

"We definitely don't have time for Monopoly," Mike said, entering the living room with a sleepy Holly who walked over to El and sat on her lap.

"Hi Holly," El said and tucked the little girl's hair behind her ears. Around them, Lucas and Max were making sure everyone had a glass of pop or juice to drink at midnight.

"Why do we need something to drink?" El asked when Max handed her a glass.

"At midnight, when everyone says Happy New Year, you raise your glass to toast to the new year, and take a drink," Max explained. "It's a lot less lame when you're older and you're actually toasting with alcohol." El nodded her understanding and couldn't help but notice how many unwritten traditions all these holidays had.

"All right, we're three minutes away. Mike, turn up the volume," Dustin instructed and Mike did as he requested. Holly stood from El's lap, so El stood up and took Mike's hand, waiting for midnight to strike. As El stood there listening to the host of the special on television talk about 1985 coming to an end, her mind couldn't help but fill with the whirlwind that was this year. She had started it off by getting serious with the first and only boyfriend she ever hoped to have. She learned more of what it meant to be part of a family. She made friends with the girl who helped her really discover who she was as a person and come into her own skin. She learned what a breakup was and learned that she never wanted those words uttered between herself and Mike again. She experienced pain worse than anything she ever could have imagined, even after her years of

trauma in the lab, when she learned that the one true father figure she ever had who had loved her had died fighting to protect her. She learned the heartache that comes with a long distance relationship, but she learned how it strengthens love that is meant to be. Never in her life did El think so much could happen to herself in such a short time, but here she was, having survived the ups and downs, the heartbreak of Hopper's death, and the Mind Flayer, surrounded by her closest friends and the only person who made her happy by simply existing.

"Ten... nine..." El came back from her thoughts as she heard her friends join in with the countdown on the television. "Eight... seven..." She continued with them. "Six... five..." El felt a sensation in her stomach that she could not explain. She was happy and excited and hopeful for 1986. But there was also... fear? Worry? "Four... three..." El pushed the negative thoughts away as hard as she could, determined to leave them in 1985. "Two... one!"

"Happy New Year!" the six of them shouted in unison, and before El could react, Mike had wrapped his arms around her and kissed her deeply, running his tongue lightly over the opening of her lips before she met his with her own.

"I love you," Mike whispered, his lips still lingering close to El's.

"I love you, too," El smiled and leaned in for another kiss. When Mike pulled away from her that time, he turned and scooped up Holly and kissed her on the cheek.

"Happy New Year, Holly," he said, and his little sister echoed the holiday greeting to both him and El. "Let's get you back to bed."

While Mike took Holly back upstairs to put her back in her bed, the others turned off the television and cleaned up the food and trash from the living room. As Mike was leaving Holly's room, El met him at the top of the stairs on her way to Mike's room. Mike and El changed clothes and laid down in Mike's bed, him on his left side and her on her right side, wrapped in Mike's arms. El closed her eyes, trying to fall asleep, but she sighed as the looming feeling from earlier remained in her stomach.

"What's wrong?" Mike whispered.

"Nothing," El said quietly. "I guess I'm just sad that this trip is ending soon." Mike seemed to accept this answer, as he squeezed his arms around her body and kissed her gently on the forehead.

"I am too. But let's try not to think about that right now and just enjoy the time we have left," he said. El nodded, and after a half hour, she was still laying wide awake looking at the dark ceiling above her while Mike slept peacefully beside her, his frame moving up and down with each slow breath that he took.

0-0-0

A/N: Thank you for reading and continuing to be patient between my updates! I hope the chapter was worth the wait. Because of how I changed this story, it is shaping up to be kind of a long one! And I am excited that I have 3 other stories in the process of drafting, and I will be starting one on here after I finish this one. Let me know what you think of this chapter by leaving me a review, and I will post more for you soon!

9. Chapter 9

A/N: Thank you all for continuing to read and leave me reviews. I hope you enjoy the next chapter!

CaptainRex12: I completely agree. As sweet as it was that Joyce took El in, I was so upset that she was moving her out of Hawkins. Maybe Hopper is alive and will make it back to Hawkins and El will end up back with him? I don't care how they do it as long as she comes back!

39CluesStrangerThingsFan-Star: Thank you! I'm glad you liked it.

Jenicakrung: Thank you! I am glad that you like it so much.

AnUnknownStranger: Thank you!

Phieillydinyia: Welcome! Better late than never :) Thank you so much for your kind words on each chapter so far! I am really glad you are liking it so much.

Disclaimer: I do not own Stranger Things or any of its original characters.

0-0-0

A couple mornings later, Mike woke up at 5:48AM and knew he would have to leave soon for the basement. He thought back to New Years when he didn't have to leave until he heard his parents' car pulling in at 8:30. He had rushed out of the room, stopped at Nancy's room to grab Lucas, and made it downstairs before his parents had entered the house. That had been such a good night. He was able to go to bed and fall asleep with El, hold her all night, and wake up naturally without having to sneak back downstairs. It was the best night of sleep he had had during El's whole visit. But now, his parents were sleeping down the hall, and the clock read 5:55AM, which meant his dad would be getting up soon. Next to him, El appeared to be sleeping peacefully, and Mike didn't want to disturb her. He could tell something had been upsetting her, but she insisted it was just

that she had had such a great time with him while visiting Hawkins and she was going to miss him again when she left. Mike gently kissed her forehead before leaving to go down to the basement.

When El felt Mike's lips on her forehead before he stood from the bed, she resisted the urge to grab his t-shirt and pull him toward herself to bury her face in him, beg him to stay, and just let him hold her. She felt him leave, and when she heard the door close, El slowly opened her eyes and let a tear fall down her cheek. She knew he was worried about her and that he could tell something was wrong other than the fact she was leaving Hawkins in a couple days. El was thankful that Mike wasn't pushing her to tell him what it was, because the truth is, El still couldn't place exactly what was wrong. All she knew was that she felt something bad, and she had felt it every day since New Years Eve. But no one else seemed to sense anything bad, so whatever it is, it must just be her, and she didn't want to put her friends in danger yet again if something was going to happen that they had nothing to do with. Then again, El thought there was also the chance that nothing was going to happen. After all, the bad feeling started as she was thinking of all the good things in her life she was thankful for from the past year. Maybe it was more of a fear of being happy? Of realizing that her life is going mostly the way she wants it to, and she is free to live happy without the bad men or inter-dimensional monsters chasing her? She hoped that was it, but she didn't want to explain that either and have her friends pity her. So, she acted as normally as she could and told no one about the sensation of fear she had in her stomach.

El closed her eyes to try and sleep for a couple hours. She rolled into the middle of the bed and felt how cold it had gotten since Mike left. With her eyes still shut, El pulled the comforter all the way up to her chin and curled her knees up to her chest, and eventually she was able to fall asleep.

"Do you think El's okay?" Will asked Mike in the basement a couple hours later. Mike sat up from where he was laying in the fort so he could see his friend.

"Yeah, why?" he asked.

"She's just seemed off the past couple days," Will explained. Mike

nodded subtly, knowing that if anyone else would have noticed, it definitely would've been Will. After all, he was the most observant and he was living with El now.

"She says she's just sad that the trip is coming to an end and she has to leave soon," Mike said, and he could tell Will was not satisfied with that answer.

"And you believe that?" he asked.

"Maybe," Mike shrugged unconvincingly. "I mean, what else could it be? Nothing has happened to upset her here."

"Unless..." Will trailed off. "Do you think maybe her powers came back and she saw something?"

"What? No. If her powers came back, she would've told me," Mike said definitively.

"She doesn't have to tell you," Will stated.

"I know she doesn't *have* to, but she would tell me if they were back," Mike insisted. "That can't be it."

"I don't know then," Will shrugged. "That's really all I can think of that would make sense. Unless she's having nightmares again."

"She hasn't woken up scared in the middle of the night," Mike shook his head.

"Maybe she's gotten better at concealing them," Will suggested. Mike considered this for a moment.

"I think she would tell me if she had a nightmare," he said after a moment. Will shook his head and chuckled.

"I know you think that she would tell you anything, but clearly something is going on that she isn't telling you," Will said, realizing how insensitive it was as it exited his mouth. "Unless you just make yourself believe that it's nothing more than she's going to miss you when she leaves."

"That must be it," Mike said after a few moments of silence. "She wouldn't lie to me. She's just upset about leaving. That's what El says it is, so that's what I'm going to believe." Will nodded, knowing that neither of them believed what Mike had just said, but neither of them wanted to continue the conversation.

"Boys, are you awake?" Karen cracked open the basement door and called down the stairs.

"Yeah, Mom, we're up," Mike called back.

"Come up and have breakfast," she said, opening the door its whole width. Mike and Will entered the dining room to join Karen, Ted, Nancy, Holly, Jonathan, and El. They sat down and helped themselves to the pancakes and bacon that was set out in the middle of the table.

"Now that you're here," Karen started, looking briefly at Mike. "I wanted to let you all know that my sister and her family are stopping through town on their way back home from their Christmas vacation, so they will be joining us for dinner tomorrow night."

"Tomorrow night is their last night here," Mike gestured toward El and Will.

"I know, sweetie, but your Aunt Bonnie only comes through town once every other year or so," Karen reminded him. "Besides, wouldn't it be nice for more of the family to meet El and Jonathan?"

"Well, Jonathan and I were actually hoping to spend their last night in town together," Nancy said. Mike was happy that he and his sister were united on this.

"Look, I'm not asking you to spend the whole day with them," Karen explained. "They are coming for dinner. They'll be here around six. After dinner you are all welcome to leave and spend your evenings however you'd like." Nancy and Mike shared a disgruntled look across the table, but neither of them objected.

After breakfast, Mike, El, and Will went down to the basement.

"So what's the big deal about your aunt and her family?" Will asked

as he took a seat in the armchair.

"They're just snotty rich people," Mike said simply from the couch. "My Aunt Bonnie likes to flaunt whatever she can to show people she has money. And my Uncle Art is just so arrogant. He loves to get you in a conversation about whatever is going on in your life, and it seems like he's interested, but then he just ends up telling you why nothing you've accomplished is good enough."

"Yep, sounds like snotty rich people," Will laughed.

"And they have two girls," Mike continued. "My cousins Arabella and Anastasia."

"Anastasia? Like the princess?" Will asked, not hiding his smirk.

"Exactly. Everyone calls them Bella and Ana," Mike explained. "Well, everyone except my aunt and uncle. They insist on the full names because they sound more elegant."

"Where do they live?" Will asked. He was thinking of his nearly decade-long friendship with Mike, and he couldn't remember hearing about this family even once.

"They live up by South Bend," Mike said. "From meeting them, you'd think they live in a palace somewhere, but they have a bunch of land outside of South Bend where their house is."

"Well, it's just one dinner. It'll be maybe two hours at the most," Will said.

"I know," Mike sighed. "I'll just tell Lucas, Max, and Dustin we won't be able to hang out until eight. There's no way I want to expose everyone to my family tomorrow."

"I'm sure it won't be that bad," Will chuckled. Mike dropped the subject but just prayed for eight o'clock the next evening to come quickly.

The next day by noon, Karen was already bustling around the house, preparing for the arrival of her sister. She had vacuumed, dusted, mopped, cleaned the windows, and was in the process of cleaning the

bathroom in the hall. Everyone else stayed out of her way as she recleaned already clean rooms. By mid-afternoon, Karen started cooking so dinner would be ready when her guests arrived.

Down in the basement, Will sat reading an X-Men comic, while El laid on the couch, her head on Mike's lap as he caressed her hair. She hadn't been sleeping well, and her need for sleep was catching up with her.

"Your mom seems pretty on edge about dinner tonight," Will said. "Your house is already clean. Is she trying to sterilize it?"

"I told you, nothing is good enough for my Uncle Art," Mike said. "He will find something to say about the house, about dinner, and probably about both Nancy and me. Lucky for Holly, she's probably still too young for my uncle's criticism."

"How old are your cousins?" Will asked.

"Bella's 17 and Ana's 16," Mike answered. On his lap, he felt El jump slightly. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, sorry," she said quietly. "I guess I just started to doze off."

"You know you can lay down for a bit if you're tired," Mike said gently, and El nodded her head before sitting up.

"Lay with me?" she asked quietly, gesturing toward the fort. Mike looked over at Will, the question and concern clear in his eyes.

"I'll just go play some Nintendo up in your room," Will offered, and Mike nodded.

"Sure, let's go lay down," Mike said to El. El crawled into the fort, and as Mike started to follow her, she stopped him.

"Mike, can you close the blankets?" she asked. At first he didn't know what she meant, but he realized that she wanted him to drop the blanket down to cover the opening to the fort. He did as she asked and laid down next to her, just the two of them alone, completely hidden by the four walls of the blanket fort. Mike laid on his back and El placed her head on his shoulder and her hand over his heart,

curling up into his side as closely as she could. Mike placed his free hand over top of hers on his chest and rubbed her back with the other.

"El, are you okay?" he asked quietly after several moments of silence. El let out a jagged sigh next to him.

"You know the answer to that," she whispered.

"What is wrong? Is there anything I can do?" Mike asked. El could feel tears beginning to brim her eyes.

"I don't know," she whispered, her lips beginning to quiver. Mike kissed the top of her head and squeezed his arm around her.

"Well why don't you start with telling me what's wrong," he offered. Once he knew that, he would figure out what he could do to help her.

"That's the problem," she said meekly. "I don't know what's wrong. I just know that I'm exhausted, and I'm scared."

"Scared? What are you scared of?" Mike asked, alarmed. "Did your powers come back? Did you see something?"

"No," El whispered, a tear falling from each of her eyes. "I wish my powers would come back. Maybe then I could find what's making me feel this way."

"Feel what way?" Mike asked gently, his heart rate increasing as all sorts of possibilities ran through his head.

"Scared," she repeated. "As if something is going to happen, but I don't know what or when."

"What kind of something?" Mike asked, hoping she didn't mean something involving monsters and gates and Russians, but also knowing she wouldn't be acting this way if it was anything less dangerous than that.

"I don't know," El repeated. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry," Mike said. "I just want you to be okay. You're leaving tomorrow, and I want to know that you'll feel safe." El nodded and moved her arm to wrap around Mike's body and squeezed him tight.

"I never want to lose you," she whispered. Mike's heart dropped into his stomach and chills shot all throughout his body. Did El think whatever the bad feeling was involved him?

"You won't," Mike said calmly. "I promise, you won't."

"Promise," El whispered so quietly Mike did not hear. She propped herself up on her elbow to look Mike in the eyes and did her best to put on a smile before leaning in to kiss him lightly. She rested her head back on his shoulder, and the two of them laid in silence for nearly twenty minutes; Mike had almost fallen asleep when El spoke up again.

"Mike," she said quietly.

"Hmm?" His eyes fluttered open and fixed themselves on El who sat up to face him.

"Please don't tell the others. I don't want to worry them, especially if it's nothing," El told him, her brown eyes pleading with him. "Just keep this between us."

"Of course. I won't tell anyone anything you don't want me to," Mike assured her. "But thank you for telling me what's been going on with you."

"I was trying to ignore it and act normal. Did anyone else notice?" she asked, her eyebrows raising with worry.

"Will asked me if something was wrong with you, but no I don't think any of the others have noticed anything," Mike replied. El let out a small sigh of relief.

"Good. I'll try harder to act normal around Will," she said.

"You can put on an act for the others if you want, but you can tell me anything. You know that, don't you?" Mike asked. El nodded and took one of his hands in hers.

"I know. I just didn't want you to worry," she said and then looked down before adding, "Or think I was weak or going crazy." Mike's eyes widened and his mouth opened halfway in shock. He sat up and reached out to tilt her face up to meet his eyes.

"I could never think you're weak. You've saved me – hell, you've saved all of us – so many times, El. And you've been through so much more than anyone should have to. I'm not just saying this because you're my girlfriend; you are truly the strongest person I know," Mike said, not breaking eye contact once. A smile crept across El's lips and Mike saw her eyes brighten up for the first time in two days, and he couldn't help but smile. He reached a hand up to the back of El's head and brought her in for a long kiss.

"Thank you," El said after they had pulled apart.

"Do you feel any better?" Mike asked. El paused for a moment and nodded.

"Yes." And she meant it. In the back of her mind, she was still worried that her bad feeling may actually turn in to something, but she knew that if it ever did, she had at least one person she could trust to hold her hand and stick by her.

Two hours later, the doorbell rang, and Mike and El heard from the living room as Karen opened the door to greet her sister and her family. Karen invited the family of four inside and helped hang their coats in the coat closet. Mike squeezed El's hand as she sat on the couch beside him.

"Two hours, then we're free," he reminded her, and El nodded. Just then two people El had never seen before rounded the corner into the living room.

"Michael," the woman El assumed was his Aunt Bonnie smiled fondly and outstretched her arms, showing the several diamond bracelets on rings on display on her wrists and hands. Mike stood to hug her, and El was overwhelmed by the smell of the perfume the woman was wearing.

"It's nice to see you," Mike said, pulling back from the hug. "Aunt

Bonnie, Uncle Art, this is my girlfriend El." El stood and smiled at the sound of her name.

"El? What is that short for, dear? Ellen? Elaine?" Bonnie asked her nephew.

"Eleanor. But she prefers El," Mike replied.

"It's wonderful to meet you, Eleanor," Bonnie said, reaching out to embrace El in a hug which El reciprocated uncomfortably.

"Dating at fourteen," Art muttered. "How long?" El looked at Mike's uncle and couldn't help but envision him as one of the gruff men in tailored suits in black and white movies who spend their time barking orders and walking through clouds of cigar smoke.

"A little over a year, officially," Mike replied.

"So, so young," Art muttered. "We aren't allowing Arabella and Anastasia to have boyfriends while in high school. Once they're eighteen, of course, they're able to make their own decisions. But I wasn't going to let my little girls throw away their academics by being boy-crazy."

"Luckily, I've managed to maintain straight A's," Mike said dryly.

"Where are Arabella and Anastasia anyway?" Bonnie looked around before turning back to Mike. "And where is Nancy?"

"Probably still upstairs with her boyfriend. They've been up there all day," Mike said, trying to agitate his aunt and uncle who were already annoying him. By the way his aunt's eyes widened briefly, Mike realized it worked.

"Well then," Bonnie muttered. "I suppose I'll just see her at dinner. I'm going to go say hello to Holly, the only one left who I'm assuming is still pure." Mike stifled a laugh at the tone his aunt used that was dripping in judgement. Bonnie and Art turned and left the living room.

"Wow," Will said entering the room. He had heard the entire interaction from around the corner in the hall. "I thought you had to

be exaggerating."

"No, these people are insane," Mike stated.

"Dinner's ready," Karen said from the living room doorway, a pointedly fake smile across her face, before turning to leave.

"She's clearly uncomfortable too," Will observed. "So why does she let them even come over?"

"She's her sister," Mike shrugged. "Plus my mom likes trying to impress people, even people like my aunt and uncle." The three of them went to join everyone in the dining room. Next to Art and Bonnie were two teenage girls who Bonnie introduced as Arabella and Anastasia. Both had sleek brown hair as dark as Mike's, Arabella's was shoulder-length and straight as a board while Anastasia's was down to the middle of her back and curly. El thought they were both very pretty.

"What's for dinner?" Art asked as Karen placed a roasted chicken, potatoes, and vegetables in the middle of the table. "Chicken," he commented emotionlessly.

"It smells great, Mom," Nancy said supportively, and Mike, Jonathan, Will, and El agreed. Karen smiled before taking her seat as everyone began filling their plates.

"So, Nancy, what does Jonathan do?" Bonnie asked as she cut her chicken.

"He goes to college in Fort Wayne and is working part-time," Nancy replied, rubbing Jonathan's leg under the table, bracing for impact.

"A college boy," Art said. "What are you studying, Jonathan?"

"Photography, sir," Jonathan replied, and Art immediately sighed aloud in disapproval, which Jonathan pretended not to hear. Nancy had prepared him for the disapproving glances and comments, and he was biting his tongue to get through a peaceful dinner.

"What about you, Michael? What colleges are you looking into?" Art turned toward his nephew.

"Um, I haven't given it much thought yet. I'm only in my freshman year," Mike said.

"Not an excuse to not start looking," Art advised.

"Arabella and Anastasia are both working hard to get into ivy league schools," Bonnie beamed. "I don't think they'll have any difficulties due to the grades they maintain."

"The grades they maintain because they focus on school and not dating or video games or other distractions," Art pointed out.

"I have straight A's," Mike repeated, growing defensive. "I'm probably not going to look at colleges until next year or the year after."

"Well, if you look in to Notre Dame, you're welcome to stay with us to save the cost of room and board," Bonnie smiled. Karen cleared her throat, and Mike knew his aunt had finally struck a nerve.

"Wherever Mike chooses to go to college, and I am sure he will be able to get in anywhere he wants, we will manage the cost of it ourselves. But thank you for the offer, Bonnie," Karen said coldly.

"What about you, Eleanor?" Bonnie shifted her attention to El, ignoring her sister's remark. "Do you see college in your future?" El wasn't sure what to say. She didn't want to tell this woman that she was homeschooled by Mrs. Byers; that would bring on a whole new type of judgement from Bonnie, and then she would be faced with questions about Mrs. Byers' qualifications to educate.

"I haven't started thinking about college yet, either," El answered politely. Mike smiled and touched his leg to hers under the table.

"We'll probably apply to the same places," he added.

"Well, if your grades are as good as you say, don't limit yourself to only colleges that your girlfriend can get accepted to," Bonnie said. Mike felt his blood begin to boil.

"What does that mean?" he asked.

"Nothing personal," Bonnie shrugged. "But not everyone is ivy league

material." Mike looked over at his two cousins who had remained silent throughout this entire conversation. They appeared to be purposely avoiding his gaze, and Mike knew they were secretly enjoying this.

"I wonder if your daughters would still be ivy league material if they didn't have your bank account to buy their way in," Mike spat.

"Michael!" Karen exclaimed over Bonnie's gasp and the sound of Art choking on his water.

"I think I'm done with dinner, Mom," Mike said, placing his napkin on his plate and standing to push in his chair. "Aunt Bonnie, Uncle Art, always a pleasure." Art glared at Mike's sarcasm and Bonnie was still gaping from the shock of his outburst. Mike took El's hand and led her to the front door, Will following. They grabbed their coats and stepped outside into the cool January air.

"Didn't I tell you? Insane," Mike reiterated, pointing at the closed front door.

"I could not believe how blatantly rude they were being," Will agreed. "And your mom still wants their approval."

"Yeah and she's probably going to have to listen to how the chicken was dry or the potatoes could've used more seasoning or whatever, and then my Aunt Bonnie will casually walk through the living room and run her finger over the mantle and wipe it on a handkerchief, pretending there's dust," Mike rattled off as if the same routine happens every visit. He shook his head and headed toward the garage. "Whatever. Let's go to the arcade. We should've just skipped this stupid dinner anyway." Mike pulled out Nancy's old bike for Will, and El got on the back of his like usual, and the three of them headed to the arcade to enjoy Will and El's last night in town.

"Thought you guys weren't going to be here until after eight," Lucas said when Mike, El, and Will entered the arcade. Max ran over to hug El.

"Well, dinner didn't go so well. Which was expected," Mike shrugged.

"So Mike told off his aunt and uncle and we left. Which was not expected," Will added with a laugh.

"They were being rude," Mike shrugged, and Lucas and Dustin could tell he didn't want to discuss it further. "Now let's enjoy Will and El's last night with us."

"El, if you want to see a master at work, come with me," Max said before grabbing El's arm and pulling her to the Dig Dug machine. For the next hour, the six teenagers took turns playing games and topping each other's scores. El even scored higher than Lucas on Dig Dug, which he knew Max would never let him forget. At around 8:40, they left the arcade and hopped on their bikes to ride to a local ice cream parlor.

"Ice cream in January?" Will asked as they walked inside.

"We're not eating outside. And it's not all that cold out," Max pointed out. After the six of them had ordered and received their ice cream cones, they were sitting around a table in the corner of the parlor.

"What was your favorite part of the trip?" Max asked El, taking a lick of her cone. "And you can't say just being here with all of us, and you can't say seeing Mike." El smiled, knowing she was essentially just told that she couldn't answer the question honestly.

"I don't know. We did so much," El said, thinking back to opening gifts on Christmas day, going ice skating as a group, walking through the Christmas lights display with Mike on their date, spending the girls day with Max.

"Fine, your favorite thing you did with Mike and your favorite thing you did with us," Max relented, which made the question a bit easier.

"Well, I loved the Christmas lights at the park. I had never seen anything like that before," El began. "And as a group, ice skating was a lot of fun. I would probably do that again."

"What about you, Will?" Dustin asked.

"Seeing Troy get decked in the face," Will answered instantly, thinking back to every hurtful thing the bully had called him over the

years.

"I forgot that happened," Max laughed. "Mike, you better hope Troy doesn't run into you anywhere for a while. The punch was cool, but he could still kick your ass."

"Wouldn't be the first time," Mike shrugged, unconcerned.

"So when are you visiting again?" Max asked, directing her attention back to El.

"I think not until Easter," El answered sadly, and Mike felt a pang of sadness in his stomach.

"That's so far away," Max whined. "I'm going to miss you."

"I'm going to miss all of you too," El said.

"Do you think Mrs. Byers would let us come over for a weekend sometime?" Max asked, perking up.

"All of you?" Will asked.

"It doesn't have to be all of us," Max shrugged. "But if she'd allow that, the more the merrier. Otherwise, I could come up sometime and spend a weekend just the two of us girls."

"That would be fun," El smiled and Max reached forward to give her a hug. When the six of them had finished their ice cream cones, the employees had begun to sweep the floor and one walked over to the front door to turn the Open sign to the side that said Closed.

"Guess that's our cue to leave," Will said, looking at his watch which read 10:00PM. The six of them walked outside to their bikes, and no one wanted to start the goodbyes.

"Please call me sometime this week, and remember to ask Mrs. Byers about a girls weekend," Max said, pulling El in for a tight hug. El nodded her promise to Max that she would. As they all hugged each other goodbye, El felt that it was quite reminiscent of when she and Will had previously had to hug their friends goodbye in October. She hoped it would get easier with time. They all rode off in the

directions of their homes, and El squeezed around Mike's waist a little tighter as she rode on the back of his bike, knowing it was the last night they would spend together for a while.

0-0-0

A/N: Thank you all for reading. I know parts of this chapter were a little angsty, but I'm sure you could tell by the description of this story that something would be coming up sooner or later. Please let me know what you're thinking in the reviews, and I hope to be back with more tomorrow!

10. Chapter 10

A/N: Welcome back to chapter 10! I'll be honest, when I first started this story, I didn't see it having more than 10 chapters. I thought my first story back in the world of fanfiction would be a nice short one. But, things changed, and here we are 10 chapters in and the action hasn't even unfolded yet. So, I hope you enjoy this chapter, and thank you for your feedback!

El Henderson: Thank you :)

Grievesforyou: Thank you, I'm glad you liked it!

Ishiptoast: I'm glad you liked it! And of course, I hate when Mike and El aren't doing well haha

Dr. Vorlon: OMG MOOD

Phieillydinyia: Hahaha, well I'm glad you've been patiently coming back for more!

CaptainRex12: Thank you so much! I live for Mike defending El.

39CluesStrangerThingsFan-Star: It would be cool! And does that really sound like something Mike would do..... hahaha

Exploding Helmets: Thank you so much.

Stranger Things (Guest): Exactly! People need to learn Mike can defend himself/El! I'm glad you are enjoying the story so far.

Jenicakrung: Yes, the hurt is good : (Thank you so much for saying that! I am flattered this is making you feel ST4 vibes. I hope you like this next chapter!

Disclaimer: I do not own Stranger Things or any of its characters.

0-0-0

When Mike, Will, and El returned to Mike's house, the guests had left,

and Nancy and Jonathan were sitting in the living room. They could hear Karen in the kitchen cleaning up from the evening, but Mike was hoping to avoid her for the evening because he didn't want his last night with El to be delayed because of a lecture from his mother.

"Welcome home," Nancy said sarcastically. "I can't believe you abandoned me with them like that. You couldn't have stayed through dinner?"

"No," Mike answered simply, hanging his coat and walking into the living room to join his sister and Jonathan. "The way they were acting was bullshit. Honestly, I don't know why you still let them talk to you that way."

"It was only a couple hours of my time," Nancy shrugged. "I can bite my tongue for one evening."

"Well I guess you have more self-control than I do," Mike said.

"Well I already knew that," Nancy laughed.

"How was it after we left?" Mike asked. El and Will had joined them in the living room, and frankly they were also interested in hearing the answer.

"Uncle Art called you a disrespectful little shit. Mom didn't like that. Bella and Ana were quiet literally the whole night," Nancy recapped. "Oh, and apparently the chicken was just a little on the dry side, and the potatoes were bland." Nancy and Mike both rolled their eyes.

"So now we won't have to see them again for another year or two," Mike sighed.

"Thank god," Nancy chuckled. "So did you guys have fun at the arcade?"

"Yeah, we did. El beat Lucas's ass at Dig Dug," Mike replied, putting his arm around El's shoulders.

"I'm sure he's already practicing to make sure that doesn't happen again. He still gets salty when Max beats him," Nancy laughed.

"Yeah, we had a good time though. I think we're gonna go get ready for bed," Mike said, looking at his watch.

"Are you both all packed and ready to go tomorrow?" Jonathan asked, looking back and forth between El and Will whose faces instantly fell.

"For the most part," Will answered gloomily.

"When are we leaving?" El asked.

"Noon," Jonathan replied. Nancy snapped her head to look at him, shocked by his answer.

"Noon?" she repeated. "I thought you could at least stay until three or four."

"It's a two and a half hour drive, and Will goes back to school the next day," Jonathan said gently. "But I'll call you and we'll figure out a weekend for you to visit me or me to come visit you again." Nancy nodded and leaned in to give Jonathan a kiss.

"Well, good night," Will said awkwardly, and his brother pulled back from Nancy to wave good night. As Will, Mike, and El left the living room, Karen appeared in the hallway, blocking their path.

"Um. Hi, Mom," Mike said. His mother crossed her arms over her chest and tried to maintain a disappointed look on her face.

"You know what you said tonight was out of line," she stated. Mike nodded.

"I do, but they were just being so-"

"Honey, I just need to know that you know it was out of line and you won't do it again," Karen interrupted him. Mike noticed that she was trying to hold back a smile, and her eyes didn't look angry; they looked amused.

"Okay, Mom," Mike smiled.

"Good. Now you all go get some sleep," Karen said, giving each of

them a hug and walking toward the living room. Will went down to the basement, and Mike accompanied El upstairs.

"I'll be up in about two hours," Mike whispered as the two of them stood outside his bedroom door, and El nodded with a sad look on her face. "What's wrong?"

"Ten days went so fast," she said quietly. Mike wrapped his arms around her in a tight hug and kissed the top of her head.

"I know it did. But you're coming here for Easter in a couple months. And if Nancy goes to visit Jonathan for a weekend, I'll make her bring me," Mike promised and El nodded her head against his chest. After another moment, she pulled back from the hug.

"Go on downstairs. I'll see you in two hours," she said with a smile. Mike gave her a kiss before going downstairs, and El disappeared into Mike's room to get ready for bed. As she stood in his room, she started to look around like it was the first time she was there again. She glanced over the trophies and ribbons he had shown her more than two years ago, and the pictures displayed of him and his friends. The wooden Millennium Falcon she had gotten him for Christmas was displayed in its new home in the center of the bookshelf. El took a deep breath and tried to stop thinking about the fact that this was the last night she would be here for over two months. She changed into a pair of pajama shorts and a t-shirt and crawled into bed to wait for Mike to join her in two hours.

Shortly after midnight, Mike crept to his bedroom and slowly opened the door. Once inside, he quietly closed the door and locked it. El had awoken from her light sleep to the sound of the door closing, and when she saw Mike walking toward the bed in the dark she scooted closer to his side of the bed and propped herself up on one elbow. Mike pulled back the covers and crawled into bed. Before his head hit the pillow, El's lips were attacking his. Mike's eyes widened in shock, but he did not try and stop her. He placed one hand on the back of El's head and pulled her even closer, deepening the kiss, and parted his lips to grant her tongue the entry it was waiting for. El shifted her weight so she was laying fully on top of Mike, and she finally pulled back and rested her forehead against his, their lips separating for the first time since Mike entered the bed.

"Did you miss me that much already?" Mike smiled as he tucked a strand of hair behind El's ear.

"Is there a problem with that?" El quipped in return.

"No problem here," Mike chuckled before turning a bit more serious. "I take it you're feeling better than you were earlier today?" El nodded; it was true, ever since she opened up to Mike about what she had been feeling, she could breathe easier and wasn't nearly as scared.

"Talking about it helped," she said. "You helped."

"Well that's what I'm here for," Mike said gently and rubbed his hand up and down El's back as she lay on him.

"That's not all you're here for," El said playfully before leaning forward to kiss him again. Leaving one hand to keep rubbing her back, Mike raised his other to El's head and quickly tangled it in her hair, closing his fist to tug at her hair lightly, and El moaned into his mouth. El's kisses moved to the side of Mike's neck, and Mike's breathing increased steadily as his pleasure intensified. Suddenly, El's lips latched on to a spot a couple inches below Mike's right ear, and he clenched his fist around the edge of the mattress to his side with a sharp intake of air.

"Jesus, El," he moaned. Mike ignored the shock he was feeling, as El had never been quite this intense before. It felt too good to question it. El moved her mouth back to Mike's, and without warning she grabbed on either side of the collar of his t-shirt and rolled onto her back, pulling him on top of her. She wrapped her arms around his neck and opened her mouth to let his tongue in and allowed him to take charge. Mike lightly tugged at El's hair, and she moaned into his mouth again. He felt chills throughout his entire body as he moved his mouth to El's neck and began kissing her skin and gently nibbling her earlobe. Mike felt El move both her hands down his back and slip them under the fabric of his t-shirt. He landed on one spot on her neck and began sucking harder, and he felt El graze her fingernails up and down his back as she moaned his name in his ear and arched her back underneath him. Mike instantly lost all feeling in his legs at that sensation. He moved his kisses back up to El's lips, and he used

one hand to trace the side of her body up and down. Mike nibbled on El's bottom lip and El dug her nails deeper into his back. In that moment, Mike became aware of how perfectly his hips were aligned with hers, and he knew he had to stop. He let the intensity of their kiss slowly die down until their lips were no longer touching, but his were still lingering right above hers. El could feel Mike's hot breath hitting her lips as she raised one hand to the side of his face.

"Mike..." she whispered, brushing his hair from his eyes and running her hand down his cheek.

"I love you so much," Mike said. El looked into the brown eyes that were hovering over her, and she didn't know what had come over her tonight, just that she had felt the overwhelming urge to kiss and hold and be with Mike as if this was the last chance she would ever have.

"I love you too," she said with a smile. Mike rolled off of her and onto his back, and El assumed her favorite cuddling position on her side with her head on his chest and her arm draped over his body. Mike fell asleep almost instantly, and El fell asleep eventually, but not before she noticed the sense of worry starting to build within her stomach again.

Shortly before noon the next day, El came down the stairs carrying her bags which Mike took from her to load into Jonathan's car. The two of them stepped out into the chilly January air and walked to the driveway. After Mike placed El's bags in the back with Will's and Jonathan's, he closed the door and leaned back against it, wrapping his arms around El as she leaned against him. Mike let out a deep breath as he thought of how reminiscent this moment was of the day he was leaving to return to Hawkins after Thanksgiving. The goodbyes were the hardest part of his and El's relationship, and he longed for the day when they no longer had to say it, and he knew El did too.

"I'm going to miss you," Mike said quietly.

"I'll miss you more," El said, looking up at him.

"Not possible," Mike smiled and kissed her forehead. "So, uh... last night was... different."

"Oh," El blushed brightly, unsure of what to say. "Different... bad?"

"No," Mike said quickly. "No, nothing, nothing about that was bad." El smiled, relieved.

"I think we just got caught up in knowing it was our last night together," she offered.

"Yeah, that was probably it," Mike agreed. He glanced toward El's neck and started to blush when he noticed the discoloration that her hair didn't completely hide.

"What?" she asked when she saw his face.

"You uh... you may want to cover... that... so Mrs. Byers doesn't see it," Mike stammered and pointed toward the hickey, blushing hard as he remembered giving it to her last night.

"How?" El asked, reaching her hand up to cover it.

"Makeup or something," Mike shrugged. "I bet Nancy can show you before you leave."

"You ready, El?" Jonathan asked as he, Will, and Nancy approached from the front door. El nodded.

"Nice hickey, Michael," Nancy smirked as she came up next to her brother and flicked the side of his neck where El had left her mark.

"Shit," Mike muttered, raising his hand to cover the spot he hadn't noticed in the mirror that morning.

"Don't worry, I'll help you hide it so Mom doesn't see it," Nancy offered.

"Great. So, on that point, can you do us a little favor?" Mike asked.

"What?" Nancy asked. Mike sighed and swept El's hair back to reveal the hickey on her neck.

"Mike!" Nancy gasped and smacked her brother on the arm.

"I know! I just... I mean, I... can you help?" he pleaded. Nancy sighed and shook her head, an amused look on her face.

"Yes, I'll fix it. El, wait here, I'll be right back and show you how you can do this until it goes away," Nancy said before going back into the house.

"Hey, thanks for everything," Will said, walking up to Mike to give him a hug.

"You don't have to thank me for anything," Mike said. "It was great seeing you again."

"You too. It's only two and a half hours. Maybe you can come stay for a weekend sometime," Will suggested. "And I know you'd want to spend some of that weekend with El, so maybe sometime Dustin or Lucas could come with you so I would still have something to do."

"Yeah, I'll see what I can do," Mike agreed. Nancy returned to the driveway with concealer and a makeup sponge.

"Come on, El. You'll need a mirror to see what to do," she said and opened the front passenger door to have El take a seat inside.

"She's a pro at covering those," Mike said to Will, gesturing toward his sister.

"Dude, she's dating my brother. There are things I don't want to think about," Will grimaced.

"Sorry," Mike laughed.

"Perfect!" Nancy exclaimed, stepping back from the open passenger door. El stood from the car and pushed her hair behind her shoulder, exposing her neck to show that Nancy had successfully helped her hide it.

"Thanks, Nance," Mike said.

"You're welcome," Nancy smirked.

"We really should get going," Jonathan said, wrapping his arms

around Nancy's waist. He leaned in to kiss her goodbye as Will walked by to take his spot in the front seat, not caring to witness the two couples he was standing with say goodbye to each other.

"I go back to school tomorrow, so I'll be back to just being able to talk in the evenings," Mike reminded El, placing his hands on her waist. She nodded in response.

"I really had an amazing time," El said. "I love you." She kissed him and let her lips linger for a moment before stepping back.

"I love you too. Have a safe trip," Mike said. Jonathan and El joined Will in the car, and Mike and Nancy watched from the driveway as the car disappeared down Maple Street.

Two and a half hours later, Jonathan pulled into their own driveway. He, El, and Will glumly pulled their bags out of the back of the car and walked toward the front door. Joyce opened the door with a warm smile on her face and her arms outstretched.

"Welcome home!" she cried, wrapping the three of them in a group hug.

"Hi Mom," Will greeted her.

"How was your trip? How was Christmas?" Joyce asked, closing the door and walking over to the couch, excited to hear about everything. Will, El, and Jonathan showed her the gifts they had gotten. Will and El shared their stories about ice skating, watching the Star Wars trilogy, New Years, the arcade, and just spending time with their friends. El also shared her date with Mike and her girls day with Max. Joyce perked up upon hearing about the day El had spent with Max; she was pleasantly surprised that El had set aside an entire day to spend with someone other than her boyfriend. After a while, Jonathan excused himself to his room, leaving Joyce with just Will and El.

"I'm gonna head to my room to unpack and get ready for school tomorrow," Will said. He gave his mom a hug and disappeared down the hallway.

"So, is there anything else you want to talk about?" Joyce asked when she and El were alone.

"I don't think so. That was pretty much all that happened," El shrugged. There was no need to worry Joyce with the bad feeling she had been having. Not yet anyway. There was still no proof that it meant anything.

"That really is a beautiful bracelet," Joyce said, reaching forward and gently lifting El's wrist. El smiled warmly as she remembered opening the gift on her first day of the visit. "Not that we didn't already know this, but he must really love you."

"That's what he says," El laughed. "I think I'm going to go unpack now too, though." Joyce nodded, and El stood and carried her bags to her room.

When El closed her bedroom door, the exhaustion from the past ten days flooded through her, and she decided that before unpacking, she would lay down for a nap. El laid down on top of her covers, and as soon as her head reached her pillow, she was consumed by the thick darkness of the sleep that followed.

0-0-0

A/N: Thank you all for reading and for being patient since I did not post yesterday. I have not been feeling well the past couple of days, and I did sit down to write this chapter yesterday, but I just couldn't. I am feeling better today, though, and I hope you enjoyed this one, even though it was a bit shorter than recent chapters! Please let me know in the reviews what you think!

11. Chapter 11

A/N: Thank you all for reading along so far. I hope you enjoy this chapter!

Exploding Helmets: Thank you, and I agree. They're young, but it's made clear in the show that they aren't your typical teenage relationship.

El Henderson: So do I!

Grievesforyou: Thank you so much for those kind words. I'm glad you've enjoyed it so far.

CaptainRex12: I promise not to be too angsty hahaha. And yes, my main complaint with the show's writers is that they took El away again. We did NOT appreciate it in season 2, what makes them think we'll appreciate it in season 4?!

Jenicakrung: Thank you! I am feeling much better. I am glad you're enjoying the story.

39CluesStrangerThingsFan-Star: Yes, I really enjoyed writing the Christmas visit chapters. But, all good things must come to an end. I hope you like the next parts of the story just as much!

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El's eyes opened slowly, heavily. Her head felt cloudy, and she blinked her eyes several times trying to clear her mind. She felt cold, and her feet were wet. She stumbled forward a couple steps and felt her feet wading in a light puddle of water. It was silent; all El heard was the shallow water beneath her feet and the sound of her short rapid breaths. Finally, her eyes focused ahead of herself; El looked out into the blackness and felt her heart drop. It wasn't dark, it was only black. El's chest started to rise and fall faster with each panicked breath she took. She raised her arms out straight in front of her body to confirm that she could still see; there was

just nothing there for her to see. This was an all too familiar blackness. She was in the void.

El closed her eyes tightly, willing herself to wake up, to come out of the void, to find herself laying in her own bed. She opened her eyes to face the blackness once more. A small whimper escaped her lips as she started to turn in circles, looking for any sign of life with her. As she spun and spun, she saw nothing. El was alone.

"Mike?" she croaked. She tried to focus on the thought of her boyfriend. Maybe it would calm her. Maybe she could see him, and he could sense her and talk her back to normal. Maybe he could bring her back to reality like he has before.

"Mike?!" she cried louder, feeling tears rise to the surface of her eyelids. "MIKE?!" El stifled a sob and felt her knees buckle. She turned in one more circle, hoping to catch a glimpse of anyone or anything familiar. Her jaw began to quiver, and she clenched her teeth tightly, burying her face in her hands. Why was she here? How could she get out? Just then, El heard a distant movement in the water, and as she felt the ripple reach her own feet, she slowly raised her face from her hands.

"Mike?" she whispered, looking out into the blackness ahead of her.

"Mike can't hear you," said a voice from behind her that turned her spine to ice. El stood frozen to the ground, her wide eyes staring straight ahead at nothing, that voice replaying in her mind and filling it with sinister memories. "No one can hear you, Eleven. No one but me."

El's rapid breathing intensified, and she felt her icy blood start to boil. She clenched both of her fists at her sides and squeezed her eyes shut one more time, hoping to open them and be at home in her bed. She slowly counted down from three in her head, and when she opened her eyes, she was face-to-face with the one person who could still incite terror within her. The root of all her trauma. The thief of her childhood. He stood before her in a simple black suit, a familiar grin on his thin face, and somehow it seemed as though his white hair was shining, even in the thick blackness.

"Papa," El whispered, barely audibly.

"Eleven," Brenner said calmly. "I've been counting down the days to see

you again." A shiver ran down El's spine, but she tried to mask her face in courage.

"Why?" she asked quietly.

"We have been looking for you for quite some time, Eleven," Brenner said. "And now that we have found you, you will not escape again."

"This isn't real," El stated, forcing a hint of strength into her voice. Brenner's grin twisted upward at the corners of his mouth as he took a step toward El. Instinctively, she took a step backward in the water.

"But it is," he countered. "And the sooner you accept where you belong and join us, the better it will be for everyone."

"I will never join you. I don't belong with you," El said, her voice becoming stronger with each word she said, filled with bravery that she didn't know she had; at least not when it came to this man.

"Eleven, with me is the only place you've ever truly belonged," Brenner continued. "And you will come back to where you belong, one way or another."

"You can't make me," El said defiantly. Brenner smirked, and El thought she heard almost a chuckle from him.

"This may help you see things differently," he said. Just then, in the blackness to El's left, the setting changed. Hawkins was to her left, but El was not in Hawkins. She could only see it as if that part of the void had turned into a cinema screen. El stood rooted in the shallow water, watching as the familiar shape of Mike's house came into view. Soon, it was like she was standing right outside in the front yard.

"Why are we here?" El asked timidly, her newfound courage diminishing at the thought of what could be coming next.

"You see, Eleven, in your adventures over the past couple of years, I know you've come to know some people who have become important to you," Brenner explained. The view that El was watching changed from the outside of the Wheelers' house to the inside of a room that was only illuminated by the streetlights shining in through the window. Chills raced through El's body as she looked at the familiar room she had slept in for

the previous ten nights.

"What are you doing?" El asked as forcefully as she could. She was now at the foot of Mike's bed, and she could see him sleeping peacefully, oblivious to the world around him.

"I know how attached you have allowed yourself to get to these people," Brenner continued. Suddenly, the scenery changed. El was no longer seeing Mike's bedroom; she was seeing Max's. She gasped as she saw her friend sleeping in her bed just as peacefully as Mike had been.

"Why are you doing this?" El whimpered.

"I told you that you were letting it fester," Brenner said. The bedroom changed. El was now seeing Lucas sleeping in his bed.

"What? Let what fester?" El cried.

"You know what's inside you; you're just afraid to let yourself see," Brenner taunted.

"See what?!" El demanded, tears filling her eyes again. She was now watching as Dustin slept in his bedroom.

"Who you really are," Brenner's voice rose. "What you're really capable of."

"Nothing! Nothing! I'm capable of nothing! They're gone! My powers are gone!" El cried. The void was fully black again; it was just El and Brenner.

"I don't believe that," Brenner said calmly. As El stared at the man before her, she started hearing distant screams. As the screams grew closer and louder, she could hear the voices calling her name.

"What..." she started to whisper before recognizing the voices she was hearing. "No," her voice caught as she covered her mouth with her hands. El heard Mike's voice first, then she was able to identify Max's, Lucas's, and Dustin's. Their blood-curdling screams made her cover her ears, but she couldn't tune it out. El dropped to her knees as her head filled with the sound of her friends screaming her name, begging her to help them, begging her to save them.

"Mike!" El called out, removing her hands from her ears. "Mike! Max!"

"Don't you see? You can't save them," Brenner said. "You can't stop us. You can only join us."

"No!" El began to sob, the sounds of Mike's, Max's, Lucas's, and Dustin's screams whirling around her head. "NO!"

"I'll see you again soon, Eleven," Brenner grinned before evaporating into smoke.

"NO!" El sat up screaming. "No! Mike?!" Her bedroom door was thrown open and Will and Jonathan ran in, Will quickly sitting on the edge of El's bed and placing both hands on her shoulders, afraid she was going to hyperventilate.

"El! El! It's me, Will," he said, trying to get her to meet his gaze. El pushed his hands off of her and stumbled to the foot of her bed, her foot getting stuck in her blankets as she tumbled to the floor.

"Hey, are you okay?" Jonathan asked as he reached toward her to try and help her up. El swatted his hands away from her too as she pulled herself to her feet and ran to the telephone in the kitchen. She quickly dialed the phone number to Mike's house. Will and Jonathan entered the kitchen as El slammed the phone back onto the wall with a loud grunt. She picked it up and pounded the same digits, only to slam it down again a moment later. El picked up the phone a third time, this time dialing the number to Max's house. A moment later, she slammed the phone down again and turned to look at Will, tears streaming down both of her cheeks.

"I can't get through to Mike or Max. I need you to call Lucas and Dustin. I don't know their phone numbers," she pleaded.

"El, what-"

"Just do it!" El screeched, picking up the receiver and shoving it at Will's chest. With a look of horror on his face, Will raised the phone to his ear and dialed Lucas's phone number. After a moment, he hung up the phone and tried Dustin's phone number.

"Nothing," Will said, returning the phone to the wall. El let out a long

cry filled with enough pain and fear to send chills down both Will and Jonathan's spines.

"We need to go back to Hawkins," El stated. Jonathan's eyes widened as he looked at the clock that read 4:17AM.

"El, it's the middle of the night," he said. "Why don't you tell us what's going-"

"You just need to trust me, okay?" El interrupted desperately. "We need to get to Hawkins right now." El stormed passed the two brothers, leaving them to gape at each other, confused and scared.

"You know she wouldn't act this way if something wasn't seriously wrong," Will said quietly. Jonathan sighed and nodded, knowing his brother was right.

"Go get dressed. I'll leave a quick note for Mom," Jonathan said and grabbed a sheet of paper to write a note for Joyce who had picked up an overnight shift at the last minute.

"Let's go," El demanded when she returned fully dressed. Within minutes, El, Will, and Jonathan were en route back to Hawkins where they had left just sixteen hours prior under much better conditions.

The drive was silent. All three of the teenagers' minds were racing. Jonathan was worried about explaining this to their mom. Will was scared of what El had seen, or thought she'd seen. Both boys knew that the other was thinking about all the horrors they had experienced in Hawkins over the past two years, but neither would be the first to bring it up or ask El what this was all about. El sat in the back of the car, staring at the back of Will's seat in front of her, the echoes of those desperate screams replaying in her head. She had to get to them. She had to save them.

When they reached approximately twenty miles outside of Hawkins, they noticed snow starting to flurry around them outside. Will and Jonathan both thought about the poor luck they had had with the weather this winter. There had been no snow around Christmas time, but now that El was having a night terror that caused them to drive

two and a half hours before the crack of dawn, winter wanted to rear its head. Jonathan turned on his windshield wipers, wiping the snow off the windshield as he continued to drive further into it. The closer they got to Hawkins, the harder the snow was falling. By the time they reached Hawkins city limits, there were several feet of snow piled along the sides of the road. Jonathan had slowed significantly and was traveling at less than half the posted speed limit.

"We need to get there faster," El said.

"I'm doing the best I can, El. This much snow can be dangerous," Jonathan replied. El inhaled and exhaled a shaky breath.

"I just need to see... I need to know..." she let her voice trail off and swallowed the lump in her throat.

"I know," Jonathan said gently. "But you won't do anyone any good if I don't get us there in one piece." El sniffled and looked out the window, watching the snow fall harder and harder. Finally, after adding an additional forty minutes to the regular travel time, Jonathan turned on to Maple Street. The morning sun had begun to rise, and the fallen snow glistened, giving off what would ordinarily be a beautiful winter scene. El tapped her fingers on the armrest built into the car door, her anticipation rising. The Wheelers' driveway had not yet been shoveled, and Jonathan knew there was enough snow covering it to bury his car, so he parked on the street in front of the house. Before he had turned off the car, El threw her door open and began to step out.

"El, be careful!" Jonathan hollered. El's foot went through the snow which reached all the way up to her thigh. The sharp breath she took chilled her lungs, as the temperature must have dropped at least twenty degrees from the previous day. El pulled her leg out of the snow as quickly as she could, and she struggled through what would be the yard up to the front door, Will and Jonathan not far behind. She rang the doorbell three times before Will pulled her hand back.

Inside the Wheelers' house, Mike was sleeping in his bedroom upstairs. He slowly woke up to the distant sound of a bell ringing. His eyes focused on the clock next to his bed which read 7:45AM. Mike wiped his eyes and heard what he was certain was the doorbell. He

tossed off his covers and stood, looking towards his window for the first time, his eyes widening at how snow-covered it was. The storm had started last night, and he had been excited to learn that school was cancelled for the day. So he was irritated by the doorbell ringing so early on his snow day. The doorbell rang twice more, and Mike opened his bedroom door to go downstairs.

"Why isn't anyone answering?" El demanded.

"They're all probably still sleeping," Will said, shivering. El lifted her hand to ring the doorbell once again when she heard the door unlock and it opened to reveal a sleepy Mike standing before her.

"Mike," El sighed and threw her arms around his neck, letting the tears fall freely that she hadn't even realized had been building up.

"El?" Mike asked, confused. He felt her body shaking and realized it was not from the cold when he heard a small sob. "El, what's wrong?" El pulled back, and Mike was frightened by what he saw. He had seen her through more than he could've ever expected in the last two years, but he had never seen as much pain in her eyes as he did in that moment.

"I needed to know you were okay," she whispered.

"Yeah, I'm okay. Why wouldn't I be? What happened?" Mike asked with growing concern.

"That's something we would all like to hear in a much warmer setting," Will said from behind El.

"Shit, sorry, come in," Mike stepped to the side to allow the three surprise visitors to enter the house. Will, Jonathan, and El removed their coats and shoes quickly and quietly, and the four of them walked into the living room.

"I... had a nightmare," El started quietly. "When I woke up, I tried calling you, but... I couldn't get through."

"Yeah, the phone lines are down because of the snowstorm," Mike explained. He held one of her ice cold hands in his, and was using the other to rub her back, trying to soothe her. "El, what did you see in

your nightmare?" El was looking down at the carpet between her feet. She looked slowly up at Mike and held his eye contact, still hearing him scream for her help in her head. When she felt tears start to brim her eyes again, she shook her head and looked forward out the window.

"I need you to get the others over here first," El said. "I only want to tell it once."

A half hour later, Lucas, Dustin, and Max had all three made their way through the snowstorm to Mike's house. Max had put up the biggest fight, as she did not take well to being awoken by the sound of Mike's voice through her walkie so early in the morning on her snow day, and she certainly had not wanted to brave her way through the blizzard taking place outside. But the second Mike had mentioned El was there and it was important, Max didn't need to hear another word. Jonathan had also gone to wake Nancy, and now the eight of them were gathered in the basement.

"Your parents aren't home, are they?" Jonathan asked.

"No. My dad has a conference in Indianapolis, so they left last night," Nancy replied.

"How long is that?" Jonathan asked.

"Three days," Nancy said.

"All right, so not that I'm not happy to see you again," Lucas started, "but what is going on?" El took a deep shaky breath, and Mike squeezed her hand to encourage her to tell her story.

"I fell asleep last night, and when I woke up, I was in the void," El started. "I was completely alone. I tried getting myself out, but I couldn't. I was stuck there." Mike felt his heart ache as El's shaky voice recalled being stuck alone in the void.

"I tried calling out... for anyone... but I was alone," she continued. El swallowed hard, knowing the bad part of the story hadn't even begun yet. "Then, I heard a voice that I recognized. And I was with... the bad man... the one I called Papa." Mike clenched his teeth and

swallowed the anger that appeared at the thought of the monster who had tormented El. He squeezed her hand again and she squeezed his in return.

"He told me that no one could hear me except him," El said. "He told me that they had been looking for me, and that I needed to come back to them and join them. I told them I would never, and he said... he said... he could change my mind." She sniffled and blinked back the tears that were threatening to resurface.

"We were still in the void. But he showed me Hawkins," El continued. "He... he showed me..."

"Take your time," Mike said quietly, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. El took a deep breath to prepare herself to continue.

"He showed me your house," El said, turning to Mike. "This house. He brought me inside to your bedroom. I saw you sleeping." Mike felt his blood turn to ice, and he couldn't find any words to say. El turned back to the group.

"Then he showed me each of you asleep in your rooms too," El said. "One at a time. To show me that you were safe, or something, I don't know. He was telling me that I have become too close to you all and that I need to accept who I really am." El looked around at each of her friends, all of whom had similar looks of shock and fear on their faces. She hated that she was making them feel that way.

"After that, it was just me and Papa alone in the void again... But then I started hearing the screams," El whispered. The others looked silently around at each other, deafened by the silence and terrified to ask her the question they all knew the answer to.

"What screams?" Mike finally asked.

"Yours," El whispered. "All of yours. You were all screaming for me, begging me to help you, to save you. And I couldn't... I couldn't. He... Papa... told me that I can't save you. And I couldn't. I'm so sorry." El broke down in tears, and Mike wrapped his arm around her shoulders, leading her head into his chest and stroking her hair while she cried. He and Will shared a glance of pure terror, and everyone

seemed to be waiting for someone else to be the first to speak.

"So, what does all of this really mean?" Max finally asked when El had stopped crying and wiped away her tears.

"We can't rule out the possibility that this was all just a terrible, terrible nightmare and not actually real," Lucas said. El shook her head.

"He said he would see me again soon," she concluded.

"So... assuming this man is out there somewhere..." Max started but let her voice trail off. There were too many questions, and Max didn't know where to start. Was he working alone? Was he working with the Russians? Was the Upside Down somehow involved again? How did he know about El's friends? How *much* did he know? Was he planning to use El's friends to get to her?

"He was able to spy on each of us, so obviously he knows we all exist," Dustin began. "But the question is, what else does he know?"

"If he's been working toward this all along... we need to assume he knows everything," Mike said. "We need to assume he knows everything about all of us, everything that has happened ever since that very first day."

While the details of El's nightmare were setting in with everyone, none of them noticed the dark silhouette standing in the shadows of the woods facing the back of Mike's house. None of them heard the snow crunching under its feet as it turned to walk deeper into the trees. And none of them saw the red tip of the cigarette burn out against one of those trees before the silhouette disappeared.

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A/N: I hope you all enjoyed this chapter. Thank you for continuing to read, and leave me a review to let me know what you're thinking!

12. Chapter 12

A/N: Thank you all for your feedback. I am so glad you all liked the first 10 chapters where I let the characters be (mostly) happy. Hopefully you like the not-so-happy chapters just as much!

JayneFawn: Thank you!

Exploding Helmets: Thank you, I appreciate it.

Dr. Vorlon: Yes, thank you for being patient through my 10 chapter build up haha

39CluesStrangerThingsFan-Star: Thank you! That's the reaction I was going for.

Jenicakrung: Yes! As much as I hate that El is being separated, I am looking forward to seeing her bond with Joyce, Jonathan, and Will in ST4!

Phieillydinyia: I gave you 10 chapters of happiness haha. Maybe I'll throw in some more ;) But I am glad you are liking it. Thank you for reading!

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Mike looked at the clock next to his bed and saw it was almost noon. He had napped for practically two hours, and next to him, El was still sleeping. After she had finished recapping her dream, nobody had known what to do or say. Jonathan and Nancy had slightly separated themselves from the other six and were having hushed conversations of their own, while Max, Dustin, Lucas, and Will barely spoke, appearing deep in thought. Mike had remained with El on the couch, and she had been mostly silent. When she had laid her head down on his shoulder, Mike knew the exhaustion was catching back up with her and offered to take her upstairs and lay down with her. He could

see in El's eyes that she was scared of falling asleep again, so he had pulled the covers tightly around the both of them and held her as closely to himself as he could to try and make her feel safe until he finally felt her fall asleep. Now, two hours later, Mike studied her face next to him; she looked peaceful, and he prayed that she really was just sleeping, and not stuck in the void somewhere. He felt an ache in his chest as he thought about El alone in the void, scared, trying to get out, and screaming his name. El had said that she had called out for "anyone," but Mike knew she meant she had been screaming for him.

Mike tried to roll onto his back because his right arm that El was laying on had gone completely numb, but when he followed El's arm that was wrapped around his waist, he found that she was still clinging to the back of his t-shirt in her sleep. Mike gently moved his hand between each of her fingers to break the grasp that El had so he could shift onto his back, and he shifted her with him.

"Shit," he whispered when he had rolled onto his back and El's arm was draped over him. Ordinarily he could have laid like this forever, but there was currently one problem. He really had to pee. Mike looked over at his girlfriend who was still sleeping deeply and remembered he had promised that he would not leave her side.

'I'll leave the door open, and I'll be back in like two minutes,' Mike thought to himself, rationalizing leaving El alone for just a couple minutes, and hoping she wouldn't wake up. He slowly scooted to the edge of the bed, inching out from under El's arm, until he was able to stand up. He moved quietly to the door and left it halfway open and he hurried down the hall to the bathroom to relieve himself. A minute later, Mike was walking back to his bedroom when he heard Jonathan and Nancy talking from what sounded like the dining room. He stopped at the top of the banister to listen when he heard El's name.

"I still can't believe you drove all the way here because El had one nightmare," Nancy was saying.

"Nance, you didn't see her when she woke up. She was traumatized. She wouldn't speak to us or let us touch her or anything," Jonathan defended his decision.

"Because she had a bad nightmare," Nancy insisted. "Are you going to drive two and a half hours in the middle of the night every time El wakes up scared?" Mike instantly felt anger rise inside himself at that. After everything they had seen in the past two years, Nancy is doubting El like that? Mike looked back and forth between his open bedroom door and the stairs. He decided since he was already up, he would go down for a couple minutes just to see what everyone was talking about, and he would come right back up to El.

"I just don't know what to believe," Jonathan was saying when Mike reached the doorway to the dining room.

"You could believe El," Mike suggested. Jonathan, Nancy, and Will all turned to face him from their seats around the table. "In fact, I can't believe after everything you've seen that you don't believe her."

"I never said I don't believe her," Jonathan said. "It's just, El had one nightmare, and that sucks. It does. But nothing else seems to be wrong."

"Guys, apparently it's being reported that this blizzard out there is even worse than the blizzard of '78," Lucas said as he, Max, and Dustin entered the room. "And it's literally just in Hawkins. Thirty miles from here, they only have a dusting of snow."

"Nothing else seems wrong?" Mike said to Jonathan, gesturing at Lucas.

"Weather is unpredictable, Mike. You know that," Nancy said.

"But to that extent? We have practically no snow all winter, then El starts feeling something bad coming, and a few days later the temperature drops more than twenty degrees over night and a blizzard of this magnitude hits, *only* affecting Hawkins? Nancy, please do not try to tell me that this can be explained by unpredictable midwest weather," Mike said, sounding exasperated.

"Okay, it's weird," Nancy relented. "But what could that mean?"

"He likes it cold," Will muttered from the other side of the table, and all six of the others instantly turned to face him. "Remember, he likes

it cold."

"You think the Mind Flayer still exists and is controlling the weather?" Jonathan asked. Will shifted uncomfortably, hearing the disbelief in his brother's voice.

"Maybe. Or it could be something even bigger than the Mind Flayer. When the Mind Flayer wanted it cold, it had to possess someone and make them do things like sit in a chilled room with the windows open or take an ice bath," Will explained, noticing Max flinch at the memory of Billy. "But if there's something else out there that we don't know about, and if it wants to target all of Hawkins at once, and if it has the power to control the weather itself to make it as cold as it wants..." They all looked around at each other, letting Will's theory settle in.

"Is it possible that we're all just so used to all these bad things happening because of these creatures from the Upside Down, that now when natural bad things happen like blizzards, we just look for a way to blame the Upside Down?" Max asked, breaking the silence. "It's like none of us can just move on and accept that all that bad stuff is over."

"No, that's not possible," Mike replied firmly. "Trust me, I would love to believe that nothing from the Upside Down exists in our world anymore and that what's happening outside is just some sort of freak natural disaster, but I don't. And you don't either. We've seen what comes out of that place, so we know it when we see it. We don't have to go out of our way to look for it. So everything you just said is bullshit."

"Come on, Mike," Lucas stepped in.

"No, Lucas, think about it. Plus what about everything else El saw?" Mike continued.

"She didn't see it; she dreamed it," Nancy said. "Mike, I know that you want to believe everything that El says, but she's had a traumatic life, okay? She's bound to have some nightmares every now and then. And after spending a week and a half here, on her first night back at home, away from you, sleeping by herself again, she has a nightmare

about losing you. That doesn't sound like too much of a stretch. We may just have to accept that what El experienced last night was just a bad, bad dream."

"It wasn't a dream," said a quiet voice from the base of the stairs. Everyone turned to see El standing there. They were silent as she walked to the doorway of the dining room to join them. "It wasn't a dream. It was a warning. I don't expect you all to believe me." She looked at Jonathan, and he could see the hurt in her eyes.

"It's not that we don't believe you," Jonathan said gently. "But Nancy has a point. Other than the weird weather, nothing bad has happened."

"Yet," El said quietly.

"El, did you see something else?" Mike asked. El shook her head.

"No, but I can feel him. He meant what he said to me last night, just like he meant what he said to me when I saw him in Chicago," she said.

"Wait. When did you go to Chicago?" Max asked. El looked around at everyone's confused faces as they waited for her explanation. She looked up at Mike, and he could see in her eyes how overwhelmed she was with everything. She didn't know if she could relive this story too.

"It's okay," Mike said gently, taking her hand and leading her to a chair at the dining room table, sitting in the one next to her. "Take your time, but I think you should tell them." El nodded and took a deep breath.

"It was back when I was living with Hopper. Before you all knew I was okay," El started. "I had been stuck inside that cabin for almost a whole year, and one day when I was home by myself, I found a box labeled Hawkins Lab. It had a bunch of information about my mother and about me being taken as a baby. I went to meet my mother... and she showed me things." El stopped for a moment. Mike knew the whole story, but the rest of her friends only knew that El had visited her mother and that her mother had allowed her into her memories.

El had never told them what those memories were.

"In the void, I saw her go in to labor, and I saw her give birth to me, and I saw... Papa... there when they took me from her," El continued. "They told her that I died, but she didn't believe them. A few years later, she went back to the lab to try to save me, but they caught her. And they attached these things to her head... and they shocked her brain over and over."

"Holy shit," Max whispered. El looked around the table at everyone's faces. She had been staring at the same spot in front of her on the table, that she didn't realize how engulfed in the story everyone was.

"Now she can't speak or really see anyone. She just sits there, saying the same words over and over. And she's never going to get better," El said.

"El, I'm so sorry," Nancy said next to her and squeezed El's hand that Mike wasn't holding.

"But, when she saw me before they took her, I was playing with another little girl," El continued.

"Wait. They had more kids there than just you?" Lucas asked. El nodded.

"I found her. She was number eight," she stated.

"So... is that when you went to Chicago? To find this... number eight?" Max asked, and El nodded again.

"She has powers too, but they're different from mine," El explained. "She can make you see things that aren't there. One time, she and her friends were driving from the police, and they went under a bridge, and she made the police see that bridge collapse."

"Whoa," Lucas said under his breath, imaging the possibilities power like that could have.

"So, I took a bus to Chicago, and I found her. And she and her friends... they do bad things. But they justify it because... they do bad things to the bad people," El said.

"What do you mean?" Max asked. El looked over at Mike, and he nodded to reassure her.

"I mean," El continued. She paused and bit her bottom lip. "I mean they kill the people who hurt us... When I was there, she took me with them. We found this man from the lab, and we went to his home... And she wanted me to kill him."

"Did you?" Lucas asked. El did not look up from the spot on the table she was staring at.

"He was begging us not to," she said quietly. "He told us that Papa is still alive... She really wanted me to kill him, but I couldn't do it." El heard her friends let out a collective sigh of relief.

"So then she started to, and I stopped her. She got so mad at me and told me not to take away her decisions," El continued.

"Her decision... to murder someone," Lucas clarified.

"When we got home... well, to their home... we started to argue. And she made me see Papa. She said I had to face him," El said, her voice starting to shake at the memory. "He told me that I need to confront my pain... That I have a terrible festering wound. He said... he said that this wound will continue to spread until it kills me." Everyone was silent, waiting to ensure that El was finished with her story, and also processing what they had just heard. El looked around the table at everyone, and next to her Mike squeezed her hand he was holding and placed his other hand on her knee.

"El," Nancy began softly. "You said this girl can make people see things." Mike exhaled sharply, knowing exactly where his sister was going with this.

"Nance," he said, shooting her a look of disbelief. Nancy stared back at her brother firmly.

"She made you see something that wasn't real, and it scared you," Nancy said gently. "That wasn't real, and your dream wasn't real either. He's dead, sweetie."

"Nancy, you don't know what you're talking about. You weren't

there," Mike said as calmly as he could, but he could feel his heartrate increasing.

"You weren't there either, Mike, and you keep feeding into this instead of thinking logically about it when it's clear Eleven is living with trauma you can't begin to understand, and she needs help," Nancy said, her voice rising. Jonathan placed his hand on Nancy's shoulder to calm her, and Max's eyes widened with shock that Nancy would blurt that out in front of El.

"I'm not crazy," El said quietly, turning to face Mike with a desperate look in her eyes that broke his heart.

"I know you're not," Mike said.

"I know what I saw, and I know what I felt," El insisted, her eyes filling with tears as her breathing became shorter and more rapid.

"Hey, El, look at me. Look at me," Mike placed his hands on both sides of El's face and looked directly into her eyes.

"I believe you, okay? And we're going to figure this out. I promise," he said. El nodded, and Mike swept her hair back from her face before lowering his hands into El's lap and taking both of her hands in his.

"Guys, I have an idea," Max said from across the table. "El, that was the first time you've been in the void since July, right?"

"Yes," El nodded.

"So what if your powers are back?" Max continued. "What if you can go back in and find this man you call Papa and see what he's up to?" Mike resisted the urge to completely shut down Max's idea. He didn't want El to try and go back into the void and find this man who is, yet again, causing her so much pain.

"I guess I could try," El said quietly, and Mike could hear she was scared of getting stuck again.

"You don't have to," he told her. "We can try to come up with something else." El shook her head.

"No, Max is right. This would be the fastest way to find him," El said. Mike and Max looked at each other from across the table, but neither of them spoke. They were leaving the decision up to El.

"I can do it," El said. Minutes later, the eight of them gathered in the living room. A radio tuned to static was placed on the coffee table in front of her, and El sat cross-legged on the floor, fiddling with the blindfold in her lap. Mike watched her from the floor where he sat a few feet to her right. He was brought back to the night six months prior when he was watching El prepare to enter the void and confront Billy to find the source, and Mike had wanted so badly to stop her then too. But, she had chosen to go forward with the plan, and she ended up getting hurt.

"El, are you absolutely sure you're ready to try this?" Mike asked gently, not caring about any look of annoyance that may have been on Max's face. El paused for a moment before nodding her head and turning to face him.

"I need to," she said, and Mike knew that she didn't mean that she needed to because their friends wanted her to. She needed to for herself; she needed to know if her powers were back and if so, to what extent. Most importantly, she needed to know if she could find Brenner. Mike nodded, accepting her answer.

Everyone became silent as El went through the familiar motions of tying the blindfold around her head to cover her eyes. She took a deep breath and tuned out her surroundings, hearing only the radio static. El focused hard on entering the void. She continued to breathe steadily in and out to remain calm, and she swallowed down the frustration as each moment passed that she could not enter the void. She found herself hoping for the familiar sensation of blood slowly inching down her nostril and her eyes opening into that thick blackness. El squeezed her eyes tightly closed, trying with all her might to access the void. She had no idea how much time had passed when she finally exhaled in frustration and ripped the blindfold from her head.

"I couldn't do it," she said quietly, her eyes readjusting to the natural light coming in from the windows.

"You couldn't find him?" Max asked.

"I couldn't get in," El clarified. "My powers are still gone." Mike avoided looking at his sister, not wanting to see the I-told-you-so look on her face.

"That's okay, El," he said. "We'll find another way."

"What other way do you keep talking about, Mike?" Nancy asked. "This proves what I was saying earlier."

"No it doesn't," Mike insisted.

"How could it not?" Nancy demanded. "She couldn't have actually been in the void if she doesn't have her powers. It must have all just been a dream."

While Mike and Nancy continued to bicker, Will rose suddenly and walked into the hallway. He walked to the back of the house and looked out a window facing the woods. Feeling an all too familiar sensation, his hand was drawn to the back of his neck, and he gingerly rubbed the familiar spot. Will felt his spine turn to ice, and he blinked back tears that began to form in his eyes. He stared into the snow-covered woods, and it appeared to stare back at him. Unblinking, he watched the branches wave as the cold wind blew, and Will finally broke his gaze when he turned around quickly, turning his back to the window and panting, placing a hand over his chest. He walked back to the living room, passing through the blur of his friends' voices.

"Guys," Will said shakily. The voices stopped, and everyone turned to face Will who had remained silent throughout most of the day's discussion.

"What is it, Will?" Jonathan asked. Slowly, Will raised his hand back up to the spot on the back of his neck, and he held his brother's gaze.

"El's right," Will said. "It wasn't just a dream."

0-0-0

A/N: Thank you for reading this far, and I hope you enjoyed this

chapter. Please leave me a review and let me know what you're thinking!

13. Chapter 13

A/N: Welcome back! Thank you for all the kind feedback. Enjoy chapter 13!

Jenicakrung: Yes! I promise I do like Nancy, but she strikes me as a voice of reason type of girl. I'm glad you are still enjoying it!

39CluesStrangerThingsFan-Star: Yeah, my bet is that he's still just connected to it somehow because of what happened to him in ST1 and ST2. Like even if it's not within him anymore, he has a connection to it. Unless they tell us differently in ST4, that's what I'm going with haha

CaptainRex12: Thank you so much for saying that. And yes, of course, Mike is always on El's side!

Phieillydinyia: Keep reading to find out what they're gong to do :)

The Nicholas of Cage: Thank you so much!

Caleb: Thank you. I am glad you like it so far!

Asiaad: Yay! I am glad you find it binge-worthy. I hope you like this chapter as well.

Disclaimer: I do not own Stranger Things or any of its characters.

0-0-0

Will was sitting at the dining room table between Mike and Dustin. El, Max, and Lucas were around the table as well, while Nancy stood behind the chair Max was seated in, and Jonathan paced back and forth in the doorway. The color had not returned to Will's face; he was still as white as the snow-covered ground outside, and every time he thought about what he felt, he was just as cold.

"You're sure it felt... like that?" Jonathan asked for what Will was certain was the hundredth time.

"Yes," Will sighed. "Trust me, this has been with me long enough. I know what I'm talking about."

"But what does that mean? That there's still a part of it inside you?" Lucas asked, and there was a brief silence while they all remembered the terror that had consumed their lives when Will was possessed by that creature.

"I don't think it's that," Will shook his head. "But maybe since I've been there, and it's been inside me... What if I'm somehow connected to it... forever?" Will noticed all of his friends look down or direct their gaze away from him. They wouldn't say it themselves, but Will knew they thought the same thing. He was connected to that hell. As long as it existed, he would feel it.

"So it was just the feeling?" Nancy asked gingerly. "You didn't see anything?" Will thought back to the woods and how it had appeared to be staring at him. He was certain there was something living in there, plotting; but what was it plotting? And what was it?

"I didn't see anything exactly," he answered. "I just felt it. I think it's coming from the woods out back."

"You think what's coming from the woods out back? The bad feeling?" Nancy asked. Will shook his head, getting frustrated.

"No, it's hard to explain. I would feel that feeling wherever I was if he was close," Will tried to explain. "But when I felt it here, it's like there was something drawing me out back. The woods seemed almost alive." Mike's eyes widened and he looked briefly toward the back of the house, not liking the idea that something so evil and dangerous could be festering in, quite literally, his backyard.

"I'm confused," Max said. "El's bad feeling and nightmare were about Brenner. Will's is about the Mind Flayer. Is any of this supposed to be connected?"

"I don't know," Will said and looked to his left, past Mike to make eye contact with El to ask her thoughts.

"Me neither," she said quietly.

"It's too early to tell," Mike started. Nancy cleared her throat from where she stood on the other side of the table to get her brother's attention.

"Mike, can I talk to you?" she asked. Slightly confused, Mike stood from the table and walked toward his sister who gestured him into the kitchen and waved for Jonathan to follow them.

"What is it?" Mike asked when they had reached the farthest point of the kitchen from the dining room.

"I need you to tell me if you really believe all of this," Nancy said rather bluntly, taking Mike aback.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Stop thinking as El's boyfriend and Will's best friend for a moment and look at this logically," Nancy elaborated. "El had a bad dream about the man who ruined her childhood. We spend the whole day talking about the doubts we have, and suddenly Will has a bad feeling about something that stole a giant chunk of his childhood too."

"What are you getting at?" Mike asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

"The two things aren't even related," Nancy said exasperated. "Are we supposed to believe that Brenner is somehow controlling the Mind Flayer, or what Will says could be something new even more powerful than the Mind Flayer? Do you honestly mean to tell me that you think a human being could work hand-in-hand with a monster from a different dimension?"

"Well..."

"Mike, they've both been through a lot, and they're both scarred from it. But those scars are never going to heal if the people they care about most are keeping the possibility alive that the sources of their trauma still exist," Nancy continued.

"I agree that El's could've just been a bad nightmare," Jonathan said. "But Will has been through this before. You know his feelings were

never wrong last summer when he felt the Mind Flayer was close."

"That's my point," Nancy said. "They've seen this stuff and lived this stuff before, so they think it's happening again now. And instead of feeding in to it, they need us to be able to look at them and tell them that this horrible nightmare is over. Brenner is dead. The Mind Flayer is gone. The gate is closed. Mike, you hear your friends. All of them have doubts about this; even Max."

"If you're waiting for me to look El in the eyes and tell her I don't believe her, it's never going to happen," Mike stated firmly. "I don't care how unbelievable this sounds to you. And I don't know to what level the things El saw and what Will felt are connected... No, I don't think Brenner found a way to control the Mind Flayer. But that doesn't mean El didn't see him, and it doesn't mean Will didn't feel what he felt. We just don't know what's happening yet."

"I love El and Will, but not encouraging them to move on from what we all experienced is not going to help them," Nancy pointed out. Mike took a deep breath and exhaled, calming himself before responding to his sister.

"I love them too, and I think that listening to them and not writing off what they're saying like they're crazy is going to help more than telling them they're wrong," Mike said definitively, and Nancy knew the conversation was over. She wasn't going to get through to him. Just then, the phone started ringing, causing the three of them in the kitchen as well as the five left in the dining room to jump.

"I'll get it," Nancy said, and she walked to the phone while Jonathan and Mike went to rejoin the others in the dining room.

"What was that about?" El asked when Mike sat back down next to her.

"Nothing to worry about," he said, giving her a kiss on the forehead.

"Hey Max," Nancy said, walking back into the dining room. "That was your stepdad on the phone. He and your mom want you home."

"Are you serious?" Max asked, her mouth dropping open as she

gestured at the several feet of snow outside the window.

"I know. I told him over and over that you're welcome to stay here, but he said that you're the one who chose to go out in this mess, so you can come back in it as well," Nancy relayed apologetically. Max sighed and leaned her head against the back of the chair she was sitting in.

"Well I guess I'd better get going then," she said disappointed. Lucas accompanied her into the hall so she could put on her boots and bundle up.

"Let me give you a ride at least," Jonathan offered, grabbing his own coat. Max told everyone goodbye, and she and Jonathan walked out the front door and trudged through what would be the front yard down to where Jonathan's car was parked on the street.

"Do you have a shovel?" Max asked, looking at the mountain of snow in front of them that Jonathan's car was underneath.

"Yeah, it's in... the trunk," Jonathan said. "Well shit. Let me go see what they have in the garage." Before Jonathan turned toward the house, Max reached for his wrist to stop him.

"Don't worry about it, Jonathan. Really. I appreciate it, but by the time we would get your car dug out of there, I could already be home," she said.

"Are you sure? Because we can call your house and tell them it'll be just a little longer so I can get my car out and drive you," Jonathan offered once again.

"I really appreciate it, but I'll be fine," Max smiled. After asking for a third time, Jonathan accepted that Max had made up her mind, and he started the trek back to the front door while Max started walking away from the cul-de-sac.

"Where's Max?" Lucas asked when Jonathan came back into the house.

"My car was buried. I was going to get a shovel and dig it out, but she said it would be faster to just walk home," Jonathan explained. Lucas

furrowed his brow in confusion.

"So you just let her go all by herself?" he asked.

"What did you want me to do? You know Max; she said she was fine, and she told me no like three times," Jonathan said. Lucas sighed, knowing Jonathan was right.

"I'll just call her in a little bit to make sure she made it home all right," Lucas said.

"Oh, that reminds me," Jonathan started, entering the dining room after leaving his wet boots by the front door. "Now that the phone lines are back up, I'm gonna try to call Mom." El felt guilt course through her body at the thought of Joyce. She knew her new mother figure had probably returned home from work around the same time they had arrived at the Wheelers' house that morning, and she has probably been worrying ever since reading that note that Jonathan wrote.

"Good idea," Will nodded. Jonathan went to the phone in the kitchen and picked it up to dial out, when he looked at the receiver in confusion. He placed it back on the hook for a moment before picking it up and placing it to his ear again.

"What's wrong?" Mike asked from the dining room, seeing the confusion.

"The phone," Jonathan replied. "It's still out."

"But Max's stepdad just called fifteen minutes ago," Mike said. "The phone lines couldn't have come up and down again that quickly." Mike looked over at Nancy, and she went to join her boyfriend in the kitchen. After putting the phone to her own ear, she took his hand to lead him to try the phone in the living room.

"They're still down," Jonathan said as he and Nancy reentered the dining room. Mike and El looked at each other, and Mike could see the worry in El's eyes as she realized her best friend could be in danger.

"We've got to get Max," Lucas said, jumping to his feet and running to

the hall to put on his shoes. Dustin and Mike followed him quickly, leaving El and Will at the table with Nancy and Jonathan.

"Guys, calm down," Nancy said walking toward the hall. "There's no telling how long the phone lines were up before Max's stepdad called. Maybe they were fixed and went out again."

"Or maybe it was a trap, and we just let Max walk right into it," Lucas spat back. Nancy's eyes widened in shock, but she did not try again to stop them as Lucas, Mike, and Dustin walked out the front door.

Back at the dining room table, El suddenly became dizzy and she leaned forward to rest her elbows on her knees and hold her head. She heard Will calling her name and felt him shaking her shoulder, but she could not respond. She squeezed her eyes tightly closed and felt her surroundings spinning faster and faster until she felt like she was going to throw up. In the distance, El started to hear a voice, but she couldn't make out the words. El tried to focus harder on the voice, and she felt the familiar chill in her spine when she recognized it as Papa.

"Eleven," the voice was saying, though El still could not see anyone. "You can't save her." El tried to open her mouth to scream, but nothing came out. He had Max. He was going to hurt her, and El couldn't stop him. Where did he take her? What was he going to do? El tried with all her might to make any sound come out, but nothing escaped her lips.

"It's time for you to join us. Just like he did," Brenner's bodiless voice rang in El's ears. El played those last four words over and over in her head. Just like who did? Then, a face started to appear. El focused on the image as it came slowly into focus. Her stomach dropped to the floor, and she wanted to throw up again. El stared hard at the face in front of her, trying to find a way to convince herself it was someone else with an uncanny resemblance; but El knew his every feature well enough to know that wasn't the case. Just as quickly as the image had shown itself, it started to disappear. As El's mind started spinning again, she finally found her voice and let all of her pain and fear out in one long, blood-curdling scream.

"El! EL!" El heard Mike's voice yelling her name over her own scream,

and her eyes shot open to find herself on the floor of the dining room laying on her back with Mike and Will sitting on either side of her. "Thank god," Mike sighed when El's eyes opened. As he started to reach his arms out for her, El sat up and threw her arms around his neck and began to sob. Behind her back, Will sat with a terrified look on his face, but he said nothing as he watched Mike, who looked equally horrified, hold El and rub her back, trying to calm her.

"They have her," El croaked, pulling back from Mike, her cheeks streaked with tears.

"El, what did you see?" Mike asked urgently. "Did you see Max?" When he, Lucas, and Dustin had stepped outside, they had looked up and down the street and didn't see Max. They couldn't have been more than twenty feet down the snow-covered road when Nancy had thrown the front door open and started screaming for Mike to come back because of El. Lucas and Dustin had still not come back inside.

"No," El said, wiping the tears from her face. "But... Papa said I can't save her. He's got to have her."

"You saw Brenner again?" Mike asked, and El shook her head.

"I just heard him," she clarified. "It was all dark. Until..."

"Until what?" Mike urged her. El took a deep breath to suppress the cries that threatened to escape.

"I think he has someone else," she started.

"Who?" Mike asked.

"I saw Hopper's face," El said, tears brimming her eyes as she started to blink them back furiously. Mike's mouth dropped open, shock written all over his face.

"You think... Hopper's alive?" Will asked quietly from El's other side. She turned to face him and nodded.

"He's got to be," she said. "But... they have him too."

"She's not anywhere out there," Dustin said as he and Lucas entered

the house, stomping the snow from their boots.

"I shouldn't have let her go by herself," Jonathan groaned.

"No, you shouldn't have," Lucas agreed accusingly.

"Placing blame isn't going to solve anything," Nancy stepped in.

"Oh so now you believe there's something to solve?" Mike asked angrily. "You're not going to say she probably just made it home, and El had a random nightmare in the middle of the day while she was wide awake?"

"That's enough," Nancy shouted back. The room was silent as Nancy and Mike glared at each other; Mike feeling angry at his sister for not taking them seriously from the beginning, and Nancy feeling guilty and starting to become scared.

"What did you see, El?" Lucas asked calmly, breaking the silence. El recounted what she had just told Mike, Will, Jonathan, and Nancy, and Lucas and Dustin appeared to be just as shocked.

"So Hopper survived? And now they have him?" Lucas concluded.

"I think so," El nodded. "And now they have Max, too."

"I can't believe they tricked us so easily," Lucas shook his head, thinking back to when that phone rang.

"What if she's only the first," El said quietly. Next to her, Mike took her hand, and she looked over to meet his eyes.

"What do you mean?" he asked gently.

"You know what he showed me in the void... He wants to take all of you," El explained just above a whisper. She felt the fear spreading through her veins, and her bottom lip trembled as she continued. "What if they trick all of you, one by one, and I lose you?"

"That won't happen," Mike said quickly. "We're going to find Max, and she's going to be okay."

"Yeah, and nobody else will go anywhere alone," Will added. "We'll all stick together until the end." El nodded and laid her head on Mike's shoulder, still seeing the image of Hopper's face as she stared straight ahead.

0-0-0

A/N: Thank you for reading this far. I am expecting the next chapter to be quite a bit longer than the last couple chapters have been, so bear with me over the next few days while I prepare that one for you. I hope you enjoyed this, and please let me know with a review!

14. Chapter 14

A/N: Welcome back and thank you for all the feedback. I hope to answer a lot of questions this chapter!

Jenicakrung: Oh I know! Poor El : (

39CluesStrangerThingsFan-Star: I know : /

Guest: Thank you! I am glad you are liking it.

Phieillydinyia: So many questions! Hopefully you get some answers this chapter :)

CaptainRex12: Winter is my favorite season as well! It definitely makes for a beautiful scenery, but there are obvious disadvantages to it as well haha

El Henderson: Thank you so much!

Grievesforyou: I hope you enjoy this next chapter!

Disclaimer: I do not own Stranger Things or any of its characters.

0-0-0

July 1985

His eyes began to slowly open, and he blinked several times, trying to adjust his vision to the haze around him. Feeling started to come back to his body, and he faced the palms of his outstretched arms downward on either side of his body, feeling the cold ground beneath him as he lay on his back. He shifted his eyes around, taking in the blue haze and the eerie silence ringing in his ears. Were his ears ringing from the silence? Or was it from the explosion? He squeezed his eyes closed. There was an explosion, but why?

"Joyce," he whispered, slowly opening his eyes again. The last thing he remembered was Joyce's tearful face before she had turned those keys to save the kids... to save Hawkins... and quite possibly to save

the world.

"El," he whispered even softer, closing his eyes again at the thought of his adoptive daughter. El was okay, he told himself. He had seen her leave the mall with Mike and her friends, so she couldn't have been affected by the explosion.

He opened his eyes once more and tried to prop himself up on his elbows, wincing at the pain he felt in his abdomen as he started to use those muscles. He looked down his body at the tattered stolen Russian uniform and saw spots of blood on his abdomen and legs. He took a deep breath and hoisted himself into a seated position, letting out a small groan due to the pain. He pulled the tan fabric back and briefly assessed his wounds. He ripped a piece of fabric from his uniform coat and tied it around his left thigh, above the deepest wound, and decided that this makeshift medical treatment would be good enough. Counting to three in his head, he held his breath and forced himself slowly to stand on his two feet. He held his arms out to his sides, swaying slightly at the dizziness, and focused his eyes on the ground in front of him to steady himself. He let out his breath and saw it in front of him in the cold air. Looking around, he knew two things for sure. He was in the Upside Down, and he recognized his location. He was standing in the parking lot of the Starcourt Mall, where not long ago, he was deep under the ground of the place where he stood. If he got back to that place, would he find an opening back into his world? He decided to try and find out, so he took a step forward and winced in pain.

"Shit," he breathed, looking down at his leg which had soaked his temporary bandage in blood. He clutched his abdomen and took another step toward the mall. Keeping Joyce's and El's faces in his mind, he continued to take one step at a time toward the mall, toward them. With each exertion of energy, he felt a bit of strength leave his body. As he neared the main door of the mall, he dropped to his knees, telling himself he would only take a short break before continuing. He strengthened the pressure he was putting on his abdominal wound, and his breathing became more rapid as the dizziness started to overtake him again. His eyes began to droop, and he fought to keep them open as he lay on the concrete outside of the mall entrance.

"Over there," he heard a voice in the distance. When he looked toward the sound, he saw two men in white protective suits walking toward him. His eyes were barely open when he felt the two men kneel beside him.

"Name?" one of them asked in a thick Russian accent.

"Hopper... Jim Hopper," he managed to whisper before his surroundings faded into darkness.

August 1985

Hopper laid on the mattress on his cot, staring at the ceiling. It had been over three weeks since he had spoken a single word, and he knew he would have to sooner rather than later. After passing out in the Upside Down, Hopper had regained consciousness two days later in a hospital bed in Russia in a makeshift hospital room in a building that Hopper could not decide whether it was a warehouse or prison of some sort. He had been cleaned and bandaged properly and had fluids dripping into him from an IV. A Russian doctor had come to speak to him, and Hopper had listened but communicated by only the movements of his head to say yes or no. He wanted to communicate as little as possible; the less information they could get from him, the better. But over the weeks, Hopper was growing stronger, and he knew the time was coming when these men would no longer be merciful toward him. They were simply biding their time, nursing him back to health so he would grow to trust them.

"It won't work," Hopper grunted at the ceiling.

Down the hallway from the room where Hopper lay, two Russian men were speaking with a white-haired American man. Though he tried to conceal it, the American felt his nerves wracking as he listened to what the men were saying.

"This is your only chance," one said in a thick Russian accent.

"I just need time and your patience," the American said calmly.

"How much time?" the second Russian man demanded.

"I can't say for sure," replied the American. "He is only now in better

health. I think we can begin the process next week."

"Next week?!" growled the first Russian man who had spoken. "You are stalling."

"I'm not stalling," the American insisted.

"Then we begin today." The American man's mouth threatened to drop open in shock, but he clenched his jaw to avoid his natural reaction.

"Today?" he simply repeated.

"Today," the Russian man confirmed. "It is time you prove to us that we made the right choice in not leaving you for dead, Dr. Brenner." Brenner nodded, hoping he showed more confidence in his plan than he felt. The Russian man picked up a handheld intercom and radioed instructions in Russian that Brenner could not understand.

"Petrinin," he turned toward the other Russian man who was in the room with himself and Brenner. "Go join Sokolov and Volkov. We start this now."

"Yes, sir," Petrinin nodded and left the room. The man Brenner was now alone with turned and Brenner looked at the nameplate on his uniform jacket which said Alekhin.

"Mr. Alekhin."

"General Alekhin," the man corrected him.

"Are you sure it is not too early?" Brenner asked. Alekhin turned to study Brenner's face with his dark cold eyes, and was silent for a moment.

"We have wasted enough time," Alekhin replied simply. "If he can really lead us to this girl that you speak of, we need to know what he knows."

"Do you think he trusts you enough to turn over a girl he cares so much about?" Brenner asked.

"No," Alekhin said truthfully. "But you can get anything out of anyone if you try hard enough."

Petrudin joined Sokolov and Volkov outside of Hopper's cell door. The men nodded to the guard who unlocked the large steel door and allowed them access. Hopper bolted into an upright position when the men entered his room. He managed to keep a brave expression on his face as he looked at the three men before him. Two were in the familiar uniforms that Hopper himself had worn the previous month, and the third was in a white lab coat.

"You are coming with us," Volkov said, grabbing Hopper under one arm and yanking him to his feet. Sokolov grabbed Hopper's other arm and began to lead him from the cell. Petrudin followed closely behind. The four men walked down the long hallway until they entered a room Hopper had not yet been to. When Volkov turned on the light, Hopper immediately deduced they were in an interrogation room. Hopper was sat roughly into the lone chair that was placed in the middle of the room, and Petrudin closed the door as he entered last. Hopper looked around at the dirty concrete walls with no windows. The only feature in the gray room was a rectangular mirror on the wall opposite Hopper, which he assumed to be a two-way mirror with observers on the other side.

"Tell us what you know about the girl," Volkov demanded. Hopper stared emotionless at the man in front of him. Did he mean El? He must have. There was no other girl these men could be interested in.

"We saved your life. We cleaned your wounds. We have fed and housed you. It is time you speak," Sokolov spoke this time. Hopper shifted his eyes between the two. Each of them were nearly twice Hopper's size, and Hopper knew their bulk was from muscle mass. Still, Hopper remained silent.

"Tell us where she is," Volkov repeated, squatting to Hopper's seated level and bringing his face within inches of Hopper's. Still, Hopper remained silent, staring right into Volkov's cold eyes. Suddenly, Hopper felt a flash of pain across his face as his head was jerked sideways. "TELL US WHERE SHE IS." Hopper raised his hand to the spot on his cheek where Volkov had struck him.

"No," Hopper said simply. He had known sooner or later the violence would begin. He was ready for it. Volkov struck Hopper across the face again even harder, and Hopper spit blood at Volkov's shoes.

"Then rot in here," Volkov growled. Sokolov appeared from the corner of the room he had been standing in, holding a rope. Hopper remained perfectly still while Sokolov wrapped the rope around him and the chair; Volkov held Hopper's eye contact, almost daring him to try and move.

"Doctor," Volkov nodded over at Petrunin who stepped forward, pulling a syringe from the pocket of his lab coat. Hopper's eyes widened slightly at the sight.

"What is that?" Hopper asked as Petrunin rolled up the sleeve of the white t-shirt Hopper was wearing. "I said what is that?!" The three other men in the room were silent as Hopper felt Petrunin insert the needle into his skin and inject whatever liquid was in it.

"See you soon," Volkov growled with a smirk as he, Sokolov, and Petrunin walked toward the door. Before closing the door behind them, they turned off the light, leaving Hopper alone in total darkness.

Nearly two weeks of torture had passed, and Hopper still hadn't cracked. He was impressed with himself, but he knew he would let those men kill him before he would lead them to El. Here he sat again, tied to that familiar chair in the darkness, dry blood caked to his face and body. He hadn't been bathed since the torture began; his growing hair lay in greasy matted clumps on his head, and his untamed beard stuck together in places from the dried blood. Hopper sat with his eyes closed, thinking of El living safely somewhere at that very moment. He was sure she was staying with Joyce, even though she probably spent most of her days at Mike's. Hopper almost chuckled when he thought of how his biggest problem not too long ago was that his daughter was spending too much time with her boyfriend. He opened his eyes into the darkness and leaned his head back to face the ceiling, waiting for their return. Minutes later, the door opened and the three men walked in.

"Are you ready to talk?" Volkov asked. Hopper said nothing but

glared at the man in response. "This is taking too long. Up the dosage," he directed at Dr. Petrunin. Petrunin walked toward Hopper holding another syringe. Hopper jumped, startled, as he had already been given the shot that day. He still didn't know what the shot was, but he knew he only received it once a day. Petrunin stuck the needle into Hopper's arm, and Hopper winced in pain as the liquid began to course through his body.

"Sleep tight," Volkov sneered as the three men left again, leaving Hopper alone in the familiar darkness.

September 1985

Immediately after Petrunin had been instructed to "up the dosage," Hopper's treatment in that facility had changed. He was left in the dark, tied to the chair, for days at a time with no interaction other than Dr. Petrunin coming in to inject him with his shots. He was given scraps of bread twice a day to keep him alive. Hopper was unsure of how much time had passed, but he knew this treatment would continue until he either caved in or died. He sat, his head tilted back against the back of the chair, his mouth hanging open, staring blankly above himself. When the door opened and the light turned on, Hopper didn't even move to acknowledge his visitor, who he assumed to be Dr. Petrunin with another shot.

"Today, you are going to tell us where the girl is," Volkov's voice said calmly. Hopper did not move his head, but he shifted his eyes to see the man standing in front of him. "Sit up when you are spoken to." Volkov grabbed Hopper by the shoulders and jerked his body into a seated position facing him. Hopper's head bobbed a bit and he tried to spit blood on the ground, but it landed on the stomach of his t-shirt instead.

"I don't know where she is," Hopper said in a strained whisper.

"Did you not consider yourself her father?" Volkov demanded.

"I've been here for... I don't know how long," Hopper wheezed. "I don't know."

"You must have entrusted someone to take in the girl," Volkov stated.

Hopper was silent, taking in short breaths. "Tell us what you know."

"I won't," Hopper shook his head and immediately regretted it as the pain rang through his temples.

"Yes you will," Volkov said. "You have turned her in before." Hopper felt his spine turn to ice at those words, and he turned his head toward the door that was opening.

"You," Hopper breathed in hatred at the man who entered.

"It's been a while, Jim," Brenner said, standing next to Volkov in front of Hopper.

"Doctor Brenner tells us that you once turned in the girl to save another little boy," Volkov said. Hopper's mind immediately replayed when he had directed Brenner and his people to the middle school where El and the boys had been hiding. He had given up El's safety in exchange for Will's.

"That was different," Hopper said.

"No it wasn't, Jim," Brenner replied. "You turned in Eleven to save the Byers boy. Today, you will turn in Eleven to save yourself and many others."

"No. She's my daughter now. I know her," Hopper insisted, shaking his head.

"You know nothing about her," Brenner said firmly. "She is a danger, a monster. She could kill you instantly without lifting a finger."

"She trusts me," Hopper said.

"She uses you," Brenner corrected him. "She sees you as a roof over her head and food in her stomach. You care for her for nothing in return, and she lies in wait."

"In wait for what?" Hopper spat.

"Think back, Jim," Brenner said. "Have you ever made her angry? Have you ever not given in to her every whim? Does she still seem

grateful for your hospitality then?" Hopper's mind was flooded with memories of El's temper. All the times she had slammed the door in his face, when she planted the television to the floor when he tried to ground her from it, when she had destroyed the cabin and shattered all the windows after a screaming match over a stupid boy.

"She's a teenager," Hopper deflected, still feeling the anger in his veins.

"She's a machine," Brenner pressed. "She has powers to kill and a temper that will make her do it. She doesn't care about you and probably doesn't even think of you as her father. She probably tells all her friends how stupid you are and how easy it is to get whatever she wants." Hopper thought back to all those times Mike had been in the cabin and El had completely disobeyed the clear rules. How many times had Hopper come home from work to find her bedroom door shut? And the whispering back and forth. He knew they had been mocking him all along.

"Her friends are... the bad influence," Hopper shook his head.

"No, Jim. She is," Brenner stated bluntly. "She was using you and corrupting them, all while you all loved and cared for her. It's in her nature. She isn't human." Hopper's head was spinning, a whirlwind of every argument, every fight, every temper tantrum. Was Brenner right? Had he been fooled by this girl the whole time?

"Where is she?" Volkov asked. Hopper remained silent, breathing rapidly in anger, sweat beginning to bead on his forehead. "Where is she?" Volkov repeated. After another moment of silence, Volkov's fist connected with the side of Hopper's face so hard that the chair was knocked sideways. Hopper's head was knocked on the concrete floor, and he briefly saw stars in his vision. Volkov moved in front of where Hopper lay tied to the chair and began to kick him in the ribs, demanding El's location over and over. With each kick, a memory of El's defiance flashed before Hopper's eyes. The door slams. The television. The windows. Whispering and laughing with Mike. Over and over. They were right. El had been playing him all along.

"Joyce Byers," Hopper whispered. Volkov stopped his leg which was mid-kick, about the strike Hopper's ribs again. "She would be living

with Joyce Byers." Volkov sat Hopper's chair upright again, and he and Brenner left the room, turning off the lights and leaving Hopper alone again in the darkness.

October 1985

"She is moving," said the girl, opening her eyes to face the men surrounding her. "There is a moving truck, and she is saying goodbye." The girl wiped the drop of blood from under her nostril and laid down the picture of Eleven that she was holding.

"Where to?" Brenner asked.

"I don't know. No one said," the girl replied, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, her small tattoo which read 009 visible.

"Joyce has wanted to leave Hawkins for a long time," Hopper said. "Looks like she finally is."

After Hopper had given up El's location, the torture had not stopped. The beatings, the small food rations, the shots from Dr. Petrunin had all continued. All Hopper felt each hour of the day was hatred. Finally, he had pledged his loyalty to them and agreed to join them in their quest to stop Eleven. Now, his living arrangements had upgraded. He was permitted to stay in a two-room unit with a bed, a kitchenette, and his own bathroom. The daily beatings had stopped, but the daily shots from the doctor had not. Hopper never asked what they were.

"It doesn't matter where. Nine can find her anywhere," Brenner said, placing a hand on the girl's shoulder and giving it an encouraging squeeze.

"What do you suggest we do next?" General Alekhin asked Brenner. "This move was not part of the original plan."

"It wasn't, but it may help us. She will be more vulnerable," Brenner said. "She won't know anyone."

"She won't have every day with that snarky little shithead boyfriend of hers," Hopper spat.

"She'll feel alone," Brenner concluded. Alekhin nodded and looked at the clock.

"It is feeding time," he said. Volkov nodded and rose to exit the room with Sokolov following him. They walked down the hallway, past several cell doors, until stopping outside of one. Sokolov lifted his hand toward the door, but Volkov stopped him.

"No, not the American," he said. They moved to the next door and opened it to retrieve today's sacrifice. Volkov and Sokolov dragged the man down the hallway while he resisted and begged for his life. When they reached their destination, the men threw the prisoner into a shallow pool of blood and went to open the door to release the creature they had captured. Volkov and Sokolov watched as the slimy form moved toward the man who was still begging for their mercy. Moments later, the screaming stopped, and the creature retreated back to its living space. Volkov and Sokolov secured the door, ensuring the creature was locked up properly, and they left to rejoin their team.

November 1985

"She seems happy. She and the woman and the boys are eating a lot of food... there are two people that usually aren't there... a skinny girl with curly hair... and a tall boy with dark hair... he seems to like Eleven a lot," Nine was sitting with her eyes closed, watching El and the Byers have Thanksgiving dinner.

"The boy is Eleven's boyfriend. The girl is his sister. She is dating the oldest Byers boy," Hopper explained.

"The creatures are ready," Volkov said, entering the room with Sokolov behind him. Over the past month, they had been raising four of the demogorgon creatures from the Upside Down, and the two soldiers believed the four of them to be strong enough for battle.

"We cannot just send a small army of these creatures after her," General Alekhin said, shaking his head. "With the power Brenner has described, she would destroy them in a few minutes' time."

"Then what are we to do, sir?" Volkov asked.

"Keep maintaining them," Alekhin replied. "But we need to go after Eleven's biggest weakness. Bring us the American." Volkov nodded, and he and Sokolov exited the room to retrieve the American. The two of them walked down the same hallway they walk down to choose the daily sacrifices at feeding time, and they stopped outside of the American's cell. When they opened the door, the girl sitting in the middle of the floor looked calmly up at them.

"I was wondering when you would come for me," she said calmly, a smile on her face.

"Come," Volkov demanded. The blonde girl stood, and Volkov and Sokolov each held one of her arms as they led her thin frame down the hallway.

"Hello Papa," she said to Brenner when Volkov and Sokolov entered the room with her.

"Welcome, Four," Brenner smiled as the blonde girl was seated. She rested her arms on her knees, intertwining her fingers and causing her 004 tattoo to face upward. "We need your help."

"What can I do?" Four asked. Brenner explained their plan to the girl, and he watched the apprehension grow on her face.

"What's wrong?" Brenner asked when he had finished explaining and Four maintained a look of concern.

"I don't know if I can do that," she replied. Next to her, Alekhin slammed his fist onto the table, causing Four to jump in her seat.

"We have kept you alive for the sole purpose of this mission. You will do as we say," he demanded, his voice reverberating all the concrete walls.

"You misunderstand," Four said quickly. "It is not that I don't want to. I don't know if I am capable."

"Nonsense," Brenner shook his head. "We have trained for years. I have witnessed you make wildly imaginative things appear."

"Yes, but in front of us," Four said. "Accessing someone remotely?"

Showing their mind something while they sleep? That is completely different. We have never done that." Alekhin glared at Brenner, and Brenner lifted his eyes to meet the General's gaze.

"We will," Brenner said, looking back at Four. "We will begin training and practicing immediately, and you will be able to do it. I have faith."

December 1985

Sokolov sat upright, sweat dripping from his brow and panting heavily. He wiped his forehead with his shaky hand and swallowed hard before turning to look through the window where the others stood observing. Dr. Petrunin turned off the monitor that had been measuring Sokolov's brainwaves while he had slept, and Alekhin, Brenner, Hopper, and Four entered the room where the sleep study had been conducted.

"What did you see?" Alekhin asked.

"I saw the city burning. And I heard my wife and daughter crying out for me," Sokolov recounted his nightmare. Brenner looked at Four, questioning with his eyes whether that had been what she had willed him to see. Four nodded in response.

"Brutal," Alekhin said approvingly. "She is ready."

"How is this girl going to make Eleven see her boyfriend and her friends if Four doesn't know what they all look like?" Hopper asked. "Doesn't she have to know what image she is trying to make appear?"

"I don't have to know what the people themselves look like," Four explained. "If I want Eleven to see her boyfriend, that's all I have to focus on. I don't have to know what her boyfriend looks like. Eleven knows that. If I tell her mind to see her boyfriend, her mind will fill in the gaps. All I have to know is the names of the people you want me to make her mind see."

"There are four of them," Hopper nodded. "I can give you the names."

"When do we do this?" Four asked. "Tonight?"

"No," Brenner said. "According to Nine, Eleven is still in Hawkins at her boyfriend's house. We wait until she goes home. Until she is separated from all of them again."

January 5, 1986

"She is laying down now," Nine said, her eyes closed and the blood beginning to drip from her nostril. "I think she is asleep." Nine opened her eyes and looked around at the others in the room. Alekhin, Volkov, Sokolov, Petrunin, Brenner, Hopper, and Four were scattered around the room while Nine had been watching Eleven. The eight of them were in a base in Hawkins, Indiana, that Alekhin had instructed some of his soldiers to construct for the purpose of this mission. The dwelling was concealed by a combination of the woods in which it was built and by Four's powers to trick anyone's mind who may come across it into not actually seeing it.

"We do it tonight," Brenner said definitively.

January 6, 1986

The group of eight sat concealed in their temporary base in the woods, the blizzard whirling around outside. Beneath them, they could hear the growling of the four creatures that they had brought with them. They had not fed the creatures in two days, and they were becoming restless in their underground cages.

"She is nearly here," Nine said, opening her eyes and wiping the blood from her nose. Brenner nodded but said nothing. Hopper put on his coat and hat and walked toward the door.

"I'll be back with the first one," he said before venturing out into the snowstorm. Hopper trudged through the same woods he had grown up memorizing. Eventually, he found himself at the edge of the woods facing the back of the Wheelers' house. Hopper lit a cigarette and waited. He watched as eventually, the recognizable forms of the eight teenagers filed into the basement. Hopper couldn't hear what they were talking about, but he was certain Eleven was recounting the nightmare she had had courtesy of Four. Satisfied that their plan was working so far, Hopper put out his cigarette on a nearby tree and stepped deeper into the woods.

Later that day, Hopper was joined by Volkov and Sokolov. The two Russian men filled Hopper in on what the next steps were going to be. Four would use her powers to lure the redhead girl out of the house, and they would be waiting for her a safe distance away. Hopper, Volkov, and Sokolov stood concealed behind a large mountain of snow that they could only assume was a van or large SUV covered by the blizzard, and they waited to see the front door of the Wheelers' house open. When it did, they noticed the redhead girl was accompanied by the older boy.

"What is he doing with her?" Sokolov whispered.

"It does not matter. If we need to take two, then we take two," Volkov shushed him. The three of them watched as the two teenagers spoke back and forth, gesturing to a smaller mound of snow which they assumed was the boy's car covered from the blizzard. To the men's relief, the boy went back inside the house and the redhead girl started walking down the street. The three of them fell back slightly and watched as the girl walked past them, oblivious to their presence. With a nod from Volkov, Hopper straightened the front of his coat and stepped out from his hiding place, following the girl.

Max began to hear the crunch of snow behind her and sighed as she realized Jonathan had probably followed her to convince her to come back and wait for him to dig out his car. Or maybe it was Lucas insisting on walking her home. She stopped walking and turned around to face whichever of the boys had followed her down the street, and her mouth dropped open at who she saw.

"Hopper?" Max gaped. Hopper said nothing, just continued to walk toward her. "Hopper, you're alive! I'll take you to El right now. She'll be so happy-" Max was cut off when Hopper removed his hand from his pocket and struck her hard in the temple. She fell limply to the ground, and Volkov and Sokolov ran from their hiding place over to Hopper who was standing over the girl.

"Nice work," Volkov patted Hopper on the back. "Let's get her out of here before another one comes out." Hopper leaned down and hoisted Max over his shoulder, and the three men disappeared into the woods before anyone had seen they were there.

0-0-0

A/N: I hope you enjoyed this chapter and that you found some answers to some of your questions! Please let me know what you think and leave me a review.

15. Chapter 15

A/N: Welcome back! Thank you for the feedback, and I hope you don't all hate me too much for the recent Hopper development... Anyway, here is chapter 15. Enjoy!

Phieillydinyia: I'm glad you found some answers in the last chapter! I hope you like the next one as well.

CaptainRex12: Thank you! And I agree, bad enough conditions could break just about anyone, sadly. I'm glad you like it!

Guest: We will have to wait and find out :)

39CluesStrangerThingsFan-Star: I know... sorry about that : /

Angryfanfic: Continuing!

Disclaimer: I do not own Stranger Things or any of its original characters.

0-0-0

Jonathan turned onto the main street of downtown, passing the movie theatre and several small shops that had gone out of business. He and Lucas had grabbed a shovel from the garage and dug Jonathan's car out so they could try and find Max. Now Jonathan, Lucas, and Dustin were driving slowly up and down the streets of town, looking down side alleys for any sign of Max. So far they had seen none.

"Where are we even supposed to look?" Lucas asked, sounding as helpless as he felt.

"Whoever has her wouldn't have her out in the open," Dustin said. "We should be looking for any suspicious vehicles too. Vans, tinted windows."

"Ugh," Lucas growled, covering his face with his hands. "None of this would've happened if I had insisted on walking her home."

"You don't know that," Dustin assured him quickly.

"Yes I do, Dustin," Lucas said firmly. He sighed and looked out the passenger window, avoiding looking at Jonathan in the driver's seat. Jonathan felt the tension from the teenager next to him, and he knew that Lucas blamed him for not following through with his offer to drive Max home, even though she had insisted on walking.

"We'll find her," Jonathan said simply. Lucas closed his eyes and shook his head.

"Didn't El say she saw Hopper?" Jonathan asked after a moment. Lucas nodded his head in reply. "So if Hopper is involved in Max going missing, they would need somewhere to hold her. Maybe we should check out Hopper's cabin in the woods?" After no protest from Lucas or Dustin, Jonathan started toward the outskirts of Hawkins where Hopper's cabin sat.

It was about a fifteen minute drive, and Jonathan had to park his car quite a ways away from the cabin on the road, as there was no way he would be able to drive the path through the woods which led to the hidden dwelling. The snow plows had barely made the streets in town drivable, and Jonathan did not want to risk getting his car stuck in the woods somewhere. So after parking, he, Lucas, and Dustin began trudging through the snow-covered woods toward Hopper's cabin, hoping to find some answers. By the time they saw the wooden structure through the trees, all three of the boys were shivering from the cold. They took a quick look around the snowy front yard, and seeing no signs of danger, they walked onto the porch and Lucas peeked through a window.

"I can't see anything. It's too dirty," he said. Jonathan wiggled the doorknob, and after ramming his shoulder into the door twice, he forced it open. He, Lucas, and Dustin walked inside slowly, on guard for any surprises. There was nothing to show any signs that anyone had been inside the cabin in months. Debris still covered the floors from the fourth of July. Lucas walked into the bathroom and then into Hopper's room, seeing no signs of Max or any other living beings.

"She's not here," Lucas said, returning to the living room as Dustin

opened the door to what used to be El's bedroom. He stepped in and took a look around at the furniture which had sat untouched. Dustin recognized the poster hanging over El's bed as the same poster that had hung in Mike's basement a couple years prior. He walked over to the dresser and let out a small laugh when he saw the picture of Mike in his ghostbusters costume from two Halloweens ago.

"Dustin, let's go. No one's here," Lucas said impatiently, entering El's bedroom.

"Did El never come by here to get her stuff?" Dustin asked, turning to face his friend. Lucas shook his head.

"No. Max said El couldn't bring herself to come back, so Mrs. Byers came and did it for her," he explained.

"Close," Jonathan said, appearing in the doorway. "I didn't think my mom would be able to come inside either, so I made her let me go with her. When we got here, I was right. My mom stayed out in the car crying, and I ran in and grabbed as much of her clothes as I could. I didn't take the time to look for anything else because I wanted to get in and out of here as fast as I could." Dustin looked around again at El's belongings with a look of sadness on his face.

"Should we take some of her stuff to her?" he asked.

"Dustin!" Lucas exclaimed. "Can we talk about this another time? Max is still missing."

"Right, sorry," Dustin said. Jonathan and Lucas turned to leave El's bedroom, and Dustin quickly grabbed the picture of Mike, a couple mixtapes, and a Valentine's Day card that had been laying on top of the dresser. He shoved the items into the pocket of his winter coat and quickly followed Lucas and Jonathan out of the cabin.

"Where else could she be?" Lucas asked again, desperation thickening in his voice as the three of them trekked through the snow. "It's going to start getting dark in a couple of hours."

"We'll drive through town again, and then I think we should head back," Jonathan said. "She may have made her way back to the

house. Plus, if we stay out much longer, the others will start thinking something bad happened to us too."

"Hey guys, I have an idea," Dustin said after a moment when they had reached Jonathan's car. Lucas and Jonathan both turned to face him in the backseat.

"You know somewhere else to look for Max?" Lucas asked hopefully.

"No," Dustin replied. "But I know someone who might be able to help."

While her friends were looking for her and worrying about her whereabouts, Max was coming back to consciousness in an unfamiliar location. She blinked away the grogginess and focused her vision straight ahead. Max was not tied down to anything, but she was laying on the ground in her own makeshift jail cell. Except, at least in jail cells you get a bed and blanket. Max was the only thing in her small holding area, and all that was separating her from the group of strangers outside her cell was a cell door made of solid steel bars. Max pushed herself up into a seated position and inched closer to the bars. She looked out and saw three men and two girls that she did not recognize. They noticed that she was awake, but none of them acknowledged her.

'Hopper,' Max thought. 'Hopper brought me here. Where is he?' She turned her head from left to right, searching the room for any sign of the familiar face she had seen for the first time in six months.

"The girl is awake," Volkov said to Alekhin in Russian. Max did not understand what was said, but she felt chills run down her spine at the sound of his voice and at the look on the man's face when he turned to face her. Alekhin stood from his chair and walked briskly toward Max until he was standing right on the other side of the bars keeping Max trapped. Max took a step back but did not lower her eyes from this man's face. His cold eyes studied her, and the sinister grin on his face made Max want to scream and hide, but she knew she had nowhere to go.

"Hello Maxine," he said through his thick Russian accent.

"H-how do you know my n-name?" Max stammered.

"We know more than your name, Miss Mayfield," Alekhin said. "We know how important you are to our target."

"Your target?" Max repeated. The Russian man took a step back as a curtain in the doorway to the left pulled back and out walked three men, one of whom Max recognized as Hawkins' most recent police chief prior to his assumed death. One of the men accompanying Hopper was wearing a lab coat, and Max assumed he was a doctor, as he was removing latex gloves from his hands and placing a plastic bag containing a syringe into a disposal can.

"Ah, Miss Mayfield," said the other man who had entered the room with Hopper. He was tall and thin with white hair, and he walked over to her cell to stand next to the Russian man who had been speaking to her.

"Why am I here?" Max asked as bravely as she could. "And who are you?"

"My name is Dr. Martin Brenner," Brenner replied. "And I understand that you have become one of the more important figures in Eleven's life."

"You," Max whispered in horror as she realized she was face-to-face with the man El called Papa.

"You see, Eleven belongs with us, but she is being stubborn as always," Brenner continued. "So, I have had to resort to some measures that I would have preferred to have avoided. Miss Mayfield, you have your friend Eleven to thank for your current circumstance, as if she had come back to me the many times I have requested, you wouldn't be standing in that cell right now."

"W-what are you going to do to me?" Max asked, the fear showing itself in her eyes.

"That will ultimately be up to Eleven to decide, based on how much longer she holds out," Brenner shrugged. "At the moment, you can consider yourself collateral." Max looked over Brenner's shoulder and

saw Hopper leaning against the far wall, rubbing the spot on his arm where he had just taken his daily shot from Dr. Petrulin.

"I can't believe you're doing this to her," Max said, looking straight at Hopper. "She trusted you. We all trusted you." Hopper did not move from his spot against the wall, just stared coldly at Max.

"He has finally seen Eleven for what she is," Brenner said. "You cannot fault a man for that." Brenner started to walk away from Max's cell.

"You're not going to get away with this," Max said. "And El will never join you. She's not that weak." As she spat the last part, Max took another glare at Hopper.

"Silence her. It's going to be a long night, and we don't need to hear her whining," Brenner instructed. Petrulin walked toward Max's cell, yielding another syringe, this one with just enough medicine in it to put Max temporarily to sleep.

"No! Stay away from me!" Max cried as Alekhin opened the door and accompanied Petrulin inside. Alekhin grabbed Max by the arm and wrapped his arms around her, trapping her arms down to her sides. Max continued to struggle as Petrulin held her right forearm and injected the needle into a vein in the inside of her elbow. Alekhin did not release his grip on Max until he felt her go limp in his arms.

Back at the Wheelers' house, Mike, El, Will, and Nancy were waiting in the living room for the others to return. Nancy had insisted on keeping El inside the house because if there were bad men out there trying to get to her, she needed to remain as hidden as possible. El was sitting on the couch, her head resting on Mike's shoulder, staring blankly ahead at the wall. She was replaying her nightmare and what she had experienced in the dining room over and over. El was feeling helpless, knowing Max was missing because of her and that she couldn't do anything to help find her.

"We're back!" Jonathan called as they heard the front door open and many footsteps enter the house.

"And we brought more help!" Dustin added as the group entered the

living room with two new additions.

"Ahoy children!" Steve Harrington exclaimed, entering the room and hoping to lighten the tension he could feel. He was met with confused looks from Nancy, Mike, El, and Will.

"Read the room, dingus," Robin scolded next to him and swatted his arm.

"What are you guys doing here?" Mike asked.

"Wow, okay, hello to you too," Steve said sarcastically. "Guess Robin and I are only good for free movies, then, right?"

"I made Jonathan pick up Steve and Robin. I thought we could use some extra help," Dustin explained. "Steve has been... useful... before. And Robin really cares about Max. I thought she should be involved." Mike and Will nodded, accepting Dustin's reasoning.

"Any luck?" Nancy asked, walking over and draping her arms around Jonathan's waist.

"Nothing," Jonathan sighed. Mike heard El snuffle next to him on the couch at Jonathan's response, and he gave her shoulders a reassuring squeeze.

"We looked all over town. We even went to Hopper's cabin to see if maybe he really was back and was keeping her there," Lucas said. He noticed the silence which filled the room immediately after he had spoken.

"You went where?" El's small voice came from the couch where she had sat straight up and shifted to the edge of the cushion, facing Lucas who was still standing in the doorway.

"We, uh... we went by the cabin," Lucas repeated gently.

"There was no one there," Dustin said. "It doesn't look like anyone has been there since... Well, it looks the same as it did on..." El nodded her understanding as Dustin's voiced trailed off, and she sat back against the couch again.

"So what do we do now?" Mike asked, looking to his sister and Jonathan.

"What else is there to do right now? We don't have any new information to go on," Nancy said.

"We can't just wait around for El to have another episode and hope these assholes show her a little clue every few hours," Mike argued.

"I'm not saying we should do that either," Nancy said. "But all we have right now is that Hopper may be alive, and Will had a bad feeling about the woods."

"What woods? Those woods?" Steve asked, pointing toward the back of the house. Will nodded.

"Something is not right in those woods," Will said.

"So let's check it out," Steve suggested. Lucas, Dustin, and Mike's faces all lit up at the suggestion because they had all thought the same thing at some point over the course of the day, but they knew Nancy and Jonathan would have shut them down.

"Absolutely not," Nancy said. "Not tonight."

"What do you mean 'not tonight'?" Lucas demanded.

"It's getting dark outside, and there's nothing immediately attacking us like there was in July, and the last thing I need is one of you getting lost or taken," Nancy explained adamantly.

"That is such bullshit," Lucas said. "It's getting dark? We'll use flashlights! Imagine if it was Jonathan or Mike missing. Someone *you* really care about."

"I care about Max," Nancy defended herself.

"Then let's do everything we can to find her," Lucas said.

"I think Nancy is right," Jonathan interjected. Everyone turned their attention to him, looks of confusion, shock, and annoyance staring at him from the room.

"You don't want to help us find her either?" Lucas asked.

"That's not what either of us are saying. We've been out looking for her all day. El and Will have both seen or felt things today. Everyone has had a rough day, and I don't think we would be very useful out there right now," Jonathan explained. "We all need to get some rest, and tomorrow morning we can head out first thing. It'll be daylight, and we can search for hours."

"Exactly. If we go out right now, we could easily miss something," Nancy agreed.

"Steve," Lucas turned desperately to the one who had initially suggested going into the woods. Steve looked back and forth between Lucas and Nancy and Jonathan, and Lucas could see the reluctance in his face when he spoke.

"They're right," Steve said slowly. "None of us would be much help out there tonight. It's better to wait and search all day tomorrow." Defeated, Lucas shook his head and pushed past the older teenagers, disappearing into the basement.

"I'll go stay with him and make sure he doesn't try and sneak out," Will offered, standing to follow Lucas downstairs. Jonathan and Nancy took Steve and Robin into the dining room so the four of them could talk about everything that had transpired over the course of the day and start to plan the action they were going to take the next day.

"I'm sorry we have to wait until tomorrow. It sucks," Dustin said, sitting on the coffee table to face Mike and El on the couch. Mike nodded his agreement.

"I understand," El said quietly. "They're trying to protect you all, especially since I can't anymore."

"El, you are so much more than just your powers," Mike said lovingly.

"Yes, but you know I'm right. Everyone wouldn't be so hesitant if they knew I could still rip anything in half that threatens us," El replied. Mike and Dustin shared a look that said they both knew she was right. Going up against whatever or whoever had Max would

certainly be different without El's powers there to help them. El laid her head back down on Mike's shoulder and closed her eyes, stifling a yawn.

"You're tired. Do you want to go to bed?" Mike asked, running his fingers through El's hair. She nodded.

"You can shower first," she said. Mike kissed the top of her head and went upstairs, leaving just El and Dustin in the living room.

"So you really went to the cabin?" El asked him. Dustin sighed and nodded.

"I guess we shouldn't have. No one was there," he shrugged.

"Was it still..." El trailed off. What should she say? Was it still what? A mess? Destroyed? Empty? "How did it look?"

"Exactly how we left it that night," Dustin replied. "Your room looked untouched."

"You went into my room?" El asked quietly. Dustin nodded again.

"I'm sorry, I hope that's okay," he said. "Actually, I, uh, brought you some things."

"What kind of things?" El asked, a bit confused by what he could have for her. Dustin held up his index finger to tell her to hold on while he hurried to his coat in the entryway and dug into its pockets. He returned and sat across from her again, holding some objects in his hands that El couldn't quite see.

"It's not much because we were in a hurry. But Jonathan said all they got for you from your room was your clothes. So I just grabbed what I could at the time," Dustin said, reaching out his hand. El took the small pile from him, and Dustin felt relief at the smile that instantly crossed El's face. She wiped her thumb over the picture of Mike to remove the dust that had formed, and she opened the Valentine's Day card that Mike had given her almost a year ago. Under the cheesy Hallmark message pre-printed on the card, Mike had written *El, I know I don't deserve to call someone as incredible as you my girlfriend, but thank you for letting me. I'm so happy that you are back in my life.*

Happy Valentine's Day. -Mike. El closed the card and held it to her chest, smiling up at Dustin with tears brimming her eyes.

"Thank you for these," she said. El placed the picture on top of the card and set them on the coffee table with the two mixtapes Dustin had grabbed for her.

"You're welcome," Dustin smiled back and squeezed El's hand. They heard the shower turn off upstairs.

"I guess we should get ready for bed now," El said. Dustin nodded and muttered something about a long day tomorrow. She scooped up the small pile of things Dustin had brought her, and the two of them walked toward the stairs.

"I know you're worried because your powers haven't come back, but don't be. If you remember, Steve and Robin held their own pretty well against the Russians with no superpowers," Dustin said. El chuckled in response. "We'll find Max. I know we will."

"Thank you. For everything," El smiled. She gave Dustin a tight hug before he walked down to the basement and she walked upstairs to prepare for bed.

After her shower, El walked into Mike's room in one of his t-shirts. She hadn't grabbed any other clothes that morning before she, Will, and Jonathan had rushed out of the house to drive back to Hawkins. As El lay in Mike's bed, that morning seemed like eons ago. El laid her head on Mike's chest and draped her arm over his body and her leg over his legs, and Mike laid silently rubbing her back with one hand and caressing her forearm that was draped over him with the other.

"Dustin brought me some things from my bedroom at the cabin today," El said suddenly.

"Like what?" Mike asked.

"Two of the mixtapes you made me, the Valentine's Day card, and your ghostbusters picture," El replied. Even in the dark without El looking at him, Mike blushed at her answer.

"I forgot about that," he groaned.

"The picture or the card?" El asked, shifting to look up at him.

"Both," Mike laughed.

"I'm glad I have them again," El said. "You were so cute."

"Thanks," Mike muttered, still blushing. El laid her head back down and the two of them laid in silence. Just a couple of nights ago, El had been in this same bed with her boyfriend, wishing that she didn't have to leave. Now, she was unexpectedly there again, and she would give anything to be under different circumstances.

"I'm scared for Max," El said quietly. Mike tightened his arm around her to pull her even closer to himself.

"I know, but we'll find her, and she'll be okay," he said, kissing the top of El's head.

"We might not, though, Mike," she said seriously.

"Of course we will," Mike countered.

"You don't know that," El said quietly. Mike couldn't argue with her because he knew she was right. The two of them laid silently, Mike staring at the ceiling, El staring at the wall, until El spoke again. "Why can't I just have a normal life?"

"El..." Mike began gently but didn't know what to say.

"They already took my childhood, and now they're taking my teenage years. What if this is just what my life is going to be like? I want to just be able to go to school, and hang out with my friends, and go out with you. I want us to be able to get married and have our own house and babies and not have to worry about things coming for them or for us. I just want to be normal," El said. She laid there vulnerable, knowing she had just spilled more of her heart than she ever had, and refused to look up at Mike who was still being silent.

"You, uh... you think about, like... marriage and... babies?" Mike finally stammered. El propped up on one elbow and turned to look at

her boyfriend again.

"Well, yeah. Don't you ever?" she asked, furrowing her brow questioningly.

"Um. Well, I... uh, I mean... it's just, we're so... El, I-"

"Mike, it's okay," El smiled, shushing him. Even though it was dark, she knew his cheeks were probably bright red. "We're young. You have plenty of time to get to that point. I probably wouldn't think about it either if I didn't have as much time alone as I do." El was sure she wasn't being entirely truthful, but she didn't want Mike to be uncomfortable.

"El, I love you more than anything. Please don't think that I don't. I just... you took me off guard," Mike said when he found his ability to form coherent sentences again. The truth was, he had absolutely thought about the two of them being married. In fact, he was thinking about it just last week when he and El were at that diner for brunch. But he had never thought El had had those thoughts too... and especially about babies. El's thought process was further along than his was.

"We should get some sleep," El said. "We need to be up early to look for Max." She leaned in to give Mike some goodnight kisses before snuggling back into him and closing her eyes.

A couple hours had passed, and El looked at the clock which read 1:35AM. She knew Max's disappearance was because of her, and she knew Max was in danger. El knew that Brenner wanted her and her alone. Her friends had nothing to do with this, and none of them deserved to be put in danger. El couldn't put the lives of the people she loved at risk. She took a deep breath with her eyes closed, breathing in the scent of her boyfriend from his t-shirt and the comforter they were wrapped up in. El began to sit up, and she sat back to study Mike's face while he slept. His soft brown hair that she loved getting her fingers tangled in, his long eyelashes that tickled her cheeks and neck when their kisses became extra passionate, his freckles that helped him maintain his cute boyish charm, his lips that she could feel on hers any time she closed her eyes. El was so in love with him, and she couldn't involve him in another mess because of

her. He had risked his life enough. They all had. El swept Mike's hair off his forehead and leaned down to leave a kiss on his skin before standing from the bed. She quietly opened a dresser drawer and grabbed a pair of Mike's sweatpants to pull on. She picked up the picture of Mike that Dustin had brought her and tucked it in her pocket before walking to the bedroom door. Her hand on the doorknob, she looked back one more time at Mike's sleeping form in the bed, and she moved quickly but quietly into the hallway, down the stairs, to the entryway to grab her coat, and then quietly out the front door. El sneaked around the house until she was standing in the back yard, facing the dark woods that seemed to be beckoning her. El took a deep breath and started walking forward, ready to end this nightmare once and for all.

0-0-0

A/N: I really hope you all enjoyed this chapter. I hope to be back tomorrow with more for you! Please leave me a review and let me know what you think so far.

16. Chapter 16

A/N: Thank you for the feedback! Please enjoy chapter 16.

Phieillydinyia: I will not change your mind! Dustin is the absolute best. I obviously ship Mileven, but when it comes to individual characters, Dustin has been my favorite since day one. I had to let him shine a bit! I'm glad you are liking it!

Guest: Thank you so much. I am glad you are liking it so far!

Grievesforyou: Thank you!

39CluesStrangerThingsFan-Star: Thank you! I saw no harm in throwing in a little Mileven fluff there. I'm glad you liked it!

Lil: I'm glad you like it!

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0-0-0

El was making her way through the woods, stumbling on the uneven ground that was concealed by the snow. She tried her hardest to look ahead of herself and not look up at the trees which completely hid the night sky. The branches waved ominously in the January wind, and El didn't need the darkness of the woods to spook her any more than she was. She continued deeper, hearing nothing but the snow crunching under her shoes and the branches rubbing together above her head. She was not sure where she was going, but she was sure she was in the right place.

It felt like El had been walking for hours, but she had no idea how long she had really been out there. She stopped for a moment and turned around to look behind her. Even squinting her eyes, she could no longer see the back of Mike's house. She couldn't see the edge of the woods. She must have gone back pretty far after all. El turned back around and continued her hike. A chill went down her spine that was not from the cold air as the fear crossed her mind of getting

lost in these woods. She could no longer see Mike's house; what if she got so turned around that she never found her way out. El took a deep breath and told herself she was being irrational. This wasn't the first time she had been in these woods, and she knew she could survive in them if she absolutely needed to. It must have been the fact that it was the middle of the night causing her to panic. Well, that and the mission she was currently on.

As El trudged deeper into the night, she started to feel a wave of guilt. She knew Mike would be waking up, if he had not already, and see that she was gone. He would be so worried about her, and so would everyone else when he would inevitably wake them up immediately. El briefly questioned whether she was right to leave in the middle of the night without saying a word to anyone. One recollection of the nightmare she had had, and any sense of doubt left her mind. El blinked hard, trying to force the sounds of her friends screaming out of her mind. She hoped the day would come when she could forget that entirely, but she doubted it would. El knew she had to do this. Confront Brenner and whoever else was after her. He wouldn't kill her. He needed her alive for whatever he was doing. El tried not to imagine accompanying him back to the lab. All those years that she had endured and finally escaped from were racing through her mind. While she knew that particular lab had been shut down, she knew going anywhere with Brenner would have the same effect. But she also knew if she had to sacrifice herself and go with him, she would do it in a heartbeat if it meant her friends would be safe. Then again, her powers were gone. What interest would she even be to Brenner without her abilities? Maybe he would see that she was no further use to him, and he would exit her life voluntarily. El almost chuckled out loud at how improbable that idea was, but there was no harm in hoping.

After what seemed like another eternity, El stopped walking and turned in a circle to look at her surroundings. The hundreds of trees she could see all looked the same, but she felt drawn in one direction. She took off again to follow that pull. A moment later, El stopped in her tracks when she heard the sound of snow crunching ahead of her off to the right. Frozen, she strained her eyes to try and see anything lurking in the shadows of the woods. Just when she thought she may have simply heard an animal or the wind blowing a branch, she

heard the snow crunching again. This time it happened multiple times like slow footsteps. El felt her heart start to beat faster as her eyes were glued to the direction where the sound was coming from. Her mouth opened when she saw a familiar form step into her view. The silhouette stepped closer until El could see his bearded face. She felt tears well up in her eyes instantly and her lips became to quiver.

"D-dad?" she croaked. Hopper gave no reaction. El began to take a step toward him. "I th-thought you were... gone." Hopper looked her up and down as she inched closer to him. His eyes were colder than El had remembered. It wasn't until he opened his mouth to speak that El remembered what she had heard Brenner say about Hopper in her mind. He had joined them.

"She's alone," Hopper called over his shoulder. Two strong emotions hit El like a ton of bricks. The sound of Hopper's voice that she hadn't heard in six months and she had thought she would never hear again almost made her choke on the tears that had started to spill down her cheeks. But she felt her stomach drop at the words he said because she knew it was true; he wasn't here to reunite with her. He was here to help Papa.

"At last," Brenner said, stepping out from behind the trees. He walked forward until he was shoulder-to-shoulder with Hopper, looking down at El.

"Papa," El whispered, hatred filling her body. She didn't know what he had done to turn Hopper against her, but she knew it made her hate him even more, which she had never thought was possible.

"Come with us, Eleven. It's time that you rejoin where you belong," Brenner said, extending his hand toward her. El looked at his hand and back up at his eyes.

"What do you want from me?" she asked. Brenner grinned down at her.

"I made an agreement, and in order to uphold my end of it, I need you to come with me," he replied.

"What kind of agreement?" El demanded.

"We can discuss it further when we are out of the cold," Brenner said. "Now come. Don't make us have to use force."

"Did you use force with Max?" El spat at him. Brenner lowered the hand he had extended and looked into El's eyes with a smirk on his face.

"If you come with us, I will show you to Miss Mayfield," Brenner deflected. El considered this. There was no telling where he was going to take her and who else or what else was waiting for her. But her mission had been to rescue Max, and that seemed to mean she was going to have to follow him. El nodded her head and stepped forward. Brenner took her left arm firmly in his hand and Hopper took her right arm in his. The three of them took off further into the woods.

Back at the Wheelers' house, Mike's eyes shot open as he woke suddenly, breathing heavily as his heart raced in his chest. He closed his eyes and covered his face with his hands, trying to take deep breaths to calm himself. He hadn't been having a nightmare, so he was confused by the feeling of terror that had awoken him. Just then, an overwhelming sense of dread filled his stomach as he lowered his hands and opened his eyes again. Mike reached an arm out to his side where he prayed that El was sleeping soundly, but he felt nothing but cold sheets.

"El?" he said aloud, turning to look at the emptiness next to him. He quickly threw the covers off himself and looked around his room, seeing no signs of her. Mike went into the hall and turned on the light, seeing the bathroom door open at the end of the hallway and the light inside it turned off. He hurried to the end of the hall anyway and turned on the bathroom light and pulled back the shower curtain. "El?! Shit." Mike hurried back into the hallway to his sister's bedroom door.

"Nancy! Jonathan!" he exclaimed, opening the door and turning on the light.

"Mike?" Nancy said groggily. "What the hell?"

"What time is it?" Jonathan mumbled next to her.

"Get up," Mike demanded. "El's gone."

"What?!" Nancy cried.

"What do you mean El's gone?" Jonathan asked, sitting up.

"Just what I said," Mike snapped. "I woke up, and she's not here. She's not anywhere."

"Okay, go wake the others," Nancy instructed calmly. Mike hurried from Nancy's doorway and ran down the basement stairs, turning on the light. He was met by the annoyed groans of his friends as the light woke them.

"Is El down here?" Mike asked.

"W-what?" Will stammered, wiping the sleep from his eyes.

"El. Is El down here?" Mike repeated forcefully, looking around and answering his own question.

"No, I thought she was sleeping upstairs with you," Will replied.

"Well she was, but she's gone," Mike said.

"She's gone?" Dustin repeated, standing with a look of panic crossing his face.

"Where could she be?" Will asked from the couch.

"Where do you think? She went to find Max," Mike said.

"Alone?" Lucas asked.

"Obviously," Mike replied, not hiding the annoyance in his voice. "Look, all I know is I fell asleep and she was there. I woke up and she was gone. There's nowhere else she would be. She thinks this is happening because of her, and she went off to try and fix it."

"That's insane. None of this is her fault," Dustin said.

"I know that. But she thinks it is," Mike explained. "And now she's god knows where. And what if something happened to her? Brenner."

What if Brenner has her?"

"Mike, calm down," Dustin said, placing his hand on his friend's shoulder.

"Don't tell me to calm down. If something happened to her, that's on me. She told me last night how scared she was for Max. I should've known she would try to go after her. I should've stayed awake," Mike panicked, beginning to pace back and forth.

"It's nobody's fault," Nancy said, stepping off the last stair into the basement with Jonathan, Steve, and Robin following her. Nancy and Jonathan had stopped in the living room where Steve and Robin were sleeping to wake them. "It's 4:30. What time did you fall asleep?"

"I don't know, like 11? 11:30?" Mike shrugged. "So she could already have been gone for five hours. Do you know how much you can torture someone in five hours?"

"Well hold on," Steve interjected. "If she came down the stairs while we were awake, we would've heard her whether she was going out the front or the back."

"When did you go to sleep?" Nancy asked.

"Around midnight or so," Steve replied.

"Yeah, when I fell asleep, Steve was already snoring on the floor. The last time I remember was 12:45," Robin said.

"Okay, so that cuts off a little over an hour," Nancy said.

"So what? She's still gone! And we need to go find her," Mike insisted. "And don't try telling me we need to wait for it to get brighter outside." Nancy nodded, knowing he was right.

"Everyone get dressed. I'll grab as many flashlights as I can find and meet you all back down here," Nancy instructed. Everyone hurried to follow her instructions, and the eight of them were back in the basement, ready to go, less than ten minutes later.

"Everyone stay with the group. We can't lose anyone else," Jonathan

said as Nancy passed out the five flashlights she had. The group walked to the basement door and stepped out into the brisk early morning air and began walking toward the dark woods they were certain had El trapped within them.

Deep inside the woods, Hopper, Brenner, and El had just reached the facility that the Russians had built for their mission. They stepped inside, and El was faced with three large men in Russian military uniforms, one man in a lab coat, and two young girls around her own age who she had never seen before. Her eyes darted around the room looking for Max.

"Eleven, I'd like you to meet General Alekhin," Brenner said as the large man walked over to tower over El.

"It is a pleasure to finally meet you," Alekhin said in his thick accent. El did not respond, but glared up at him.

"Are those the manners that I raised you with, Eleven?" Brenner asked. El pursed her lips and quite literally bit her tongue inside her mouth.

"Where is Max?" El asked. "You promised me Max."

"I believe Dr. Brenner has made some promises to us both," Alekhin said. He turned his gaze to Brenner. "Show me." Brenner yanked El forward into the middle of the room and sat her in an empty chair that had been waiting for her.

"I know it has been a long time since you and I have worked together, but I trust that you have continued to maintain your abilities," Brenner said. "Why don't you show General Alekhin what we worked all those years to perfect?" El stared up at him. So this was it? He had sold her out to a Russian general for her powers? She felt her stomach began to turn over as she wondered what would happen to her when she revealed that she no longer had the powers Brenner was referring to.

"What are you waiting for?" Alekhin demanded.

"Why don't we start small," Brenner offered. He walked over to the

table and placed a Coke can on it. Brenner turned back and smiled at El, knowing the task at hand was a familiar one that they had practiced often together.

"I can't," El said quietly.

"What do you mean you can't?" Alekhin demanded.

"Eleven, just like we practiced," Brenner said with mock encouragement. El looked up at Brenner, hoping he would believe her.

"My powers are gone," she said. "They have been gone for six months."

"What?!" Alekhin turned on Brenner who took a step back in fear.

"Surely she must be lying," Brenner assured the man. He turned back to El. "I don't believe you, Eleven. Your type of skill and power does not just disappear."

"It did," El said. "I can't do anything anymore."

"I have kept you alive and fed and sheltered under the pretense that you would deliver this girl with these great powers, and this is what you bring me?" Alekhin growled at Brenner. "Do you understand how much money you have wasted us? How much time and energy?"

"She is lying," Brenner repeated.

"You better hope she is, Brenner," Alekhin sneered, stepping closer to Brenner's face and narrowing his eyes. "You have one day." Alekhin stepped back from Brenner and walked away from them, disappearing into an adjacent room.

"Let's go," Brenner said, grabbing El's arm and yanking her into a standing position. Hopper grabbed El's other arm, and they started to lead her toward the back of the building.

"Let me see Max," El demanded. Brenner and Hopper stopped and turned El around to face the cell where Max was kept. El gasped when she saw her friend laying on the floor unconscious.

"Did you kill her?" El cried.

"Not yet," Brenner sneered. He pulled her arm in the opposite direction and opened a door which opened to another small room. This room has no windows, no light source, just four blank walls. "When I come back, you better be ready to stop your lying." Brenner and Hopper shoved El into the room and closed the door. El sank to the ground, hearing them slide a bolt across to lock the door. She hugged her knees to her chest and began sobbing silently into the darkness.

0-0-0

A/N: As you can tell, we are coming into the action of the story. I do plan on the next couple of chapters being considerably longer, so it may take an extra couple of days between updates, but I will do my best to make the content worth the wait. I hope you liked this chapter. Please leave a review and let me know what you're thinking!

17. Chapter 17

Exploding Helmets: Thank you! I'm glad you like it.

39CluesStrangerThingsFan-Star: I know : (

Glouton: Thank you!

Phieillydinyia: You will get answers to all of those shortly :)

CaptainRex12: All the suspense.

Isla: Welcome! And thank you. I'm glad you like it.

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0-0-0

El didn't know how much time had passed; there was no way for her to know. She sat with her back against the wall, blinking her eyes every so often, not that she could tell the difference between having them opened or closed in the pitch blackness of her cell. She was racking her brain, trying to think of anything at all she could possibly do to help Max or her other friends she knew would be looking for her by now. If she still had her powers, she could easily unbolt the door holding her in her cell, release Max, and knock out the men that would be blocking the exit. But without her powers, she would have to be more creative.

"It has been long enough," El heard the strong voice with a thick accent approach her door. She tensed up, bracing herself for whatever these men had in store for her. The bolt unlocked, and the door opened to reveal Brenner and the man he had introduced as General Alekhin. The two men entered the small room which was illuminated by the light shining in from the doorway.

"Set it up there," Brenner instructed, pointing to the middle of the room. Volkov and Sokolov entered carrying a folding card table which they unfolded and assembled in the middle of the cell. One folding chair was placed on either side facing each other. Once the

two men had left the room and only Brenner and Alekhin remained with El, Brenner turned to address her. "Get up." El stood, her legs shaking and her back remaining against the wall.

"Please let me go," she said.

"Eleven, we both know that isn't going to happen," Brenner grinned. "Please, have a seat." He gestured to the chair closest to her and sat himself in the one opposite. Brenner placed another Coke can in the middle of the table and looked at El expectantly.

"I told you, I can't do it anymore," El reminded him. Brenner exhaled in annoyance.

"Eleven, I spent the first twelve years of your life with you helping you develop and perfect your powers. I know what you are capable of, and it does not just go away. It would really be in your best interest to do as I ask," Brenner said. El stared at the Coke can and took a deep breath. She focused hard on crushing it, part of her hoping that it would work and part of her hoping that it wouldn't. She could feel Brenner's eyes on her as well. After several moments, El released her breath and looked back up at Brenner.

"See, I can't do it anymore," El gestured at the can. "I haven't been able to since July." Brenner tapped his fingers on the tabletop in thought.

"Moving things with your mind isn't the only ability you have. Let's try something else," he said, pulling a blindfold out of his pocket. "I want you to go in there and find your friend Max so you can see her patiently waiting for you to cooperate and save her life." El's mouth dropped open slightly, and she reached for the blindfold with a trembling hand.

"I don't think I'll be able to," she said quietly.

"Do it," Brenner demanded. El tied the blindfold around her head, covering her eyes, and took a deep breath. She blocked out her surroundings and tried to enter the void. Sitting in the silence, she could sense how restless Brenner was becoming. Would he believe her when she said she couldn't do it? What would he do to her next?

Would he still think she is lying to him? Finally, El removed the blindfold, shaking her head.

"I couldn't do it. I'm not lying," she insisted, handing the cloth back across the table. Brenner nodded his head.

"I'll be sure to tell Maxine that the reason she had to die was because of your lying and selfishness. It will be the last thing she hears," Brenner said, standing from the table.

"No! Don't touch her!" El screamed, standing up as well. "Please, do whatever you want to me, but don't hurt her. Let her go."

"Eleven, you were warned that if you did not cooperate, the ones closest to you would have to face the consequences," Brenner reminded her calmly.

"I am trying! I just can't do it anymore!" El cried. "Please, don't hurt her!"

"I have no choice," Brenner shrugged, stepping toward the door with Alekhin. "Maybe her death will."

"Sir, Papa," one of the girls who El did not recognize appeared in the doorway to address the men in the room. Brenner glared at the girl, clearly upset she had interrupted.

"What is it, Nine?" he asked coldly.

"It's the rest of the kids. I've been keeping an eye on them all day, and Four has been keeping our building concealed. But she is getting weak, and these kids aren't giving up," Nine explained. El felt a pang of both worry and hope as she thought of her friends out there.

"How close are they?" Brenner asked.

"They're about a half a mile away from us," Nine replied.

"Let's go," Brenner said, turning to Alekhin. "If she won't stop lying to spare Maxine, she'll certainly stop lying to spare all of them."

"What are you going to do to them?" El demanded, stepping closer to

Brenner. Suddenly, El was knocked backward by an invisible force that shoved her back into the chair she had been sitting in. She struggled to stand, but she found she could not even move her arms or legs.

"Stay here," Brenner instructed. He then looked out of the room and beckoned someone over. "Hopper, stay with Eleven. Do whatever you need to do, but make sure that when we return, the lies are finished."

"Yes, sir," Hopper said, entering the room and taking the seat opposite El that Brenner had previously been sitting in. Finally, El felt the hold on her body release, and she looked toward the door to see Nine wipe a spot of blood from under her nose. As Nine, Brenner, and Alekhin exited the room, Brenner flicked on a light switch which lit up a single light bulb above the card table, giving a dim glow over El and Hopper. El looked into Hopper's eyes from across the table; they were darker than she remembered. They looked colder, but they didn't look full of hatred. In fact, they looked rather empty. El hoped there was some of the real Hopper left in there.

A half mile away in the woods, the others were still looking for El. It was nearing five o'clock in the afternoon, and El had been missing for over twelve hours. When they had originally left earlier in the morning, they had hoped that El wouldn't be too far in to the woods, but after a few hours of searching, they realized that was not the case. Much to Mike and Lucas's objections, they had turned back at Nancy and Jonathan's insistence around 10AM to go back to the house, quickly eat something and rehydrate, and stock up properly on weapons. Nancy had been relieved that they had not actually encountered anyone or anything because when they had first left the house, they had not thought clearly enough to bring anything with them other than flashlights. Around noon, the group had headed back out, this time stocked with their usual weapons of Lucas's wrist rocket, a couple different firearms which Nancy had acquired and kept hidden from her parents after the previous summer, and Steve's bat. They had been searching again for nearly five hours, and everyone was becoming tired from walking through the uneven snow-covered woods.

"How long should we keep searching out here before we try something else?" Nancy asked Jonathan quietly.

"I don't know," Jonathan shrugged. "I mean, Will has been having bad feelings about these woods, and this is where he thinks she is. We looked around town for Max yesterday, and other than Hopper's cabin, there's no where else they would've been."

"We don't know who or what has Max, and we don't know for sure where El went or if anyone has her too," Nancy said. "We may have to give in and get the police involved."

"The only policeman who's ever been helpful is Hopper," Jonathan pointed out. "But I know what you mean. We won't be able to search these woods forever."

"Wow, and I really thought you would be on our side. She is like our sister now, after all," Will said from behind Jonathan and Nancy, as he had gotten close enough to hear what they had been whispering about.

"Of course I'm on your side. There is no other side," Jonathan said, stopping and turning to face his brother. The rest of the group stopped and turned as well, unaware of what Jonathan and Nancy had been talking about.

"Really? Because it sounds like you two are getting ready to throw in the towel," Will said accusingly.

"What?!" Mike, Lucas, and Dustin exclaimed in unison.

"It's not like that," Nancy said quickly. "It's just that we've been searching all day. El's been missing for over twelve hours, and we really have no idea where she is."

"She's out here," Mike stated matter-of-factly.

"And what about Max? She's been gone for twenty-four hours now, and we are no closer to finding either of them," Nancy continued. "Don't you think we would have been more help by calling the police and having them help search?"

"It would've been more helpful than forcing us to go to bed," Lucas spat, his anger from the previous night beginning to slip out.

"If we haven't found her in the daylight, what makes you think it would have been any easier overnight?" Nancy asked calmly, defending her decision to wait until morning instead of searching for Max last night.

"Well, El would probably still be with us because she wouldn't have had the chance to sneak out," Mike said.

"Maybe it's a good thing El did sneak out," Lucas turned on Mike.

"What did you say?" Mike's eyes widened at what he had heard from his friend.

"Your sister said it herself; Max has been missing for an entire day, and half of you never cared to help look for her. But the second El walks outside in the middle of the night, we have to leave right away and everyone wants to help," Lucas said, his anger rising.

"Don't be ridiculous. Jonathan drove you and Dustin all over town yesterday looking for Max," Mike reminded him.

"Yeah, while you, El, Will, and Nancy sat on your asses at home," Lucas yelled. "You only care about finding El. You don't give a shit about where Max is or if anything's happened to her."

"Yes I do," Mike insisted.

"Bullshit," Lucas spat. "You were fine with letting Max die as long as El was safe." Lucas shoved Mike backwards, glaring at him with fury.

"Lucas!" Dustin hurried in between Lucas and Mike, putting an arm up against Lucas's chest to try and hold him back.

"Move Dustin!" Lucas shoved Dustin out of the way and he fell backwards into the snow. "Troy might have let you get a punch in, but I'm gonna kick your ass." Lucas grabbed Mike's shoulders and pushed him up against a nearby tree, ignoring the rest of his friends screaming his name and begging him to stop.

"That's enough!" Steve hollered, grabbing Lucas by both arms and pulling him backward, throwing him down into the snow. Mike dropped into the snow as well when Lucas's hands released him, and

he quickly stood back up next to Dustin behind Steve who was standing over Lucas. "We're not helping anyone if we start to turn on each other. Now, I'm sorry if you feel like we didn't take Max being missing seriously enough yesterday, but no one can change that now. So get your shit together, and let's find her today." Lucas hesitated for a moment and then nodded. Steve reached out his hand, which Lucas grasped and pulled himself up from the snow.

"Look, I'm sorry," Lucas said calmly, offering his hand out to Mike.

"Don't worry about it," Mike said, shaking his friend's extended hand, knowing Lucas only reacted that way because he was scared for his girlfriend. "We're gonna find her."

The group regathered themselves and continued walking through the woods. No one spoke for quite some time; the only sounds were the snow crunching and sticks breaking under their feet as they trekked between the trees. After another twenty minutes, Will heard a sound from within the woods that stopped him in his tracks and sent a cold chill down his back. He looked from his left to his right, peering behind the trees the best that he could, and in the distance he thought he saw movement that couldn't be from the wind. Will squinted his eyes to focus harder, and he felt his heart fall into his stomach when he saw the figure moving toward them.

"Guys," Will squeaked. The rest of the group turned to look at Will and immediately saw his ghost-white face and widened eyes.

"What is it, Will?" Jonathan asked, placing his hand on his brother's shoulder. Will raised his right arm to point ahead through the trees at the figure moving toward them in the distance. The others saw Jonathan's mouth drop open and his eyes widen, so they came over to join the Byers boys to see for themselves.

"What the hell is that?" Dustin asked.

"I told you," Will said shakily. "It's even bigger than the Mind Flayer."

Back in El's cell, she and Hopper sat across from each other silently. El's eyes shifted from her former father figure to the tabletop to the floor. She wasn't comfortable enough to maintain eye contact, even

though Hopper's cold eyes stayed glued to her. El knew she would have to be the first one to speak, and she had no idea how much time she had, especially if she wanted to save her friends from whatever horrors Brenner and the Russians would make them encounter. El shifted uncomfortably in her seat before looking up to meet Hopper's gaze.

"Can I have some water, please?" she asked simply, and although she wanted to, she did not break the eye contact she had established with him.

"No," Hopper said firmly.

"Please, I've been locked up here with nothing to eat or drink-"

"If you want water, you need to cooperate," Hopper stated. El nodded and looked down at the floor for a moment.

"Is that how they got to you?" she asked quietly. Hopper did not respond, and El slowly looked up to meet his dark gaze again. "Did they keep you starving and dehydrated until you finally cracked?" Hopper's emotionless face did not flinch.

"No more talking until you're ready to show the general your abilities," Hopper said bluntly. El's eyes traced a line down Hopper's arm to the inside of his elbow where she saw the unmistakable red marks of a needle.

"Were they torturing you? No food, no water, drugging you full of medications and who knows what else," she continued. Hopper stared straight ahead, and El wondered if he really even saw her or if he was simply looking through her. "No one would blame you for turning. No one can hold up under those conditions forever."

"There was no turning. There was just seeing what had been there all along," Hopper said. El pondered this for a moment. Seeing what had been there all along? What had they made Hopper see differently?

"You are not a bad man. Don't you remember how you went missing in the first place? You saved so many people," El reminded him. "You saved all of Hawkins; you saved Joyce; you saved me."

"No one would have needed saving if it weren't for you," Hopper said coldly. "If you had been where you belonged, Hawkins would've been safe for the past two years. I wish Brenner would've gotten to that middle school before those boys had the chance to warn you."

"You don't mean that," El shook her head. "I know you don't."

"You don't know anything about me. Now stop talking," Hopper demanded. El was silent while she tried to calm her breathing and swallow the lump that had formed in her throat.

"I know that this isn't you. Not the real you, anyway. I know that right now you are stuck in a deep dark cave," El said gently, the lump in her throat threatening to rise again before she swallowed it back down. "I know the real you likes to watch Westerns and play board games. You made me feel safe. You said that having me around made you feel happy again."

"You had me under your spell," Hopper shook his head.

"What spell? There is no witchcraft here. Just a kind man who took in a scared, lost girl and made her some Eggos and gave her a home," El said.

"No, you tricked me. I gave you a home and kept you safe, and you were plotting against me the whole time," Hopper argued.

"Plotting what? Was that what they were trying to make you believe? That I was ungrateful? That I was going to turn against you? You were the first real parent that I've ever known," El said, searching his eyes for any sign of softening.

"I was never your parent," Hopper shook his head.

"Yes you were. You cared for me and did whatever you could to keep me safe, and even if I didn't always agree with it at the time, I know how lucky I am to have someone who loved me enough to do what was best for me," El's voice broke. She took a deep breath and leaned across the table to place her hand on one of Hopper's forearms that were crossed over his chest. Hopper tensed up but did not pull away. "Sometimes the things that you did hurt me at the time. But that's

okay, because I know now that feeling that hurt was good. It means I was out of my own cave. *You* helped pull me out of that cave." Hopper shook his head and turned his neck to look at the wall. Was she starting to get to him? El stood from her chair and walked around the table to kneel down next to Hopper, grabbing ahold of his hand.

"Please, you have to remember me. The real me. The me that you know," El pleaded. "I love you, and you loved me so much that you gave me this." El rolled up her sleeve to show Hopper her wrist. His eyes shifted down and he saw a simple diamond bracelet that he did not recognize, and under it was a light blue hair tie. His eyes fixated on the hair tie, and he felt his guard start to fall inside himself.

"Sarah," Hopper whispered. El nodded, tears forming in her eyes.

"Your daughter Sarah. You loved her so much, and I know I could never take her place, but when you and I met... you were a dad without a daughter, and I was a daughter without a dad. You needed someone to remind you what joy and happiness are, and I needed someone to love and protect me and show me everything would be okay," El said, squeezing Hopper's hand. "We needed each other. And I still need you. So please... please tell me the man I remember is still in there." El held her breath and stared into Hopper's eyes. Hopper felt his insides go warm as his mind was flooded with memories of his little girl Sarah, followed by memories of making the cabin into a home with El, teaching her Morse code and giving her daily words to learn, watching movie after movie, triple decker Eggo extravaganzas, and more. For each bad memory that Brenner had placed in Hopper's mind, there were at least three good memories kicking it out, and Hopper could nearly feel his heart filling with love for the girl kneeling before him. El watched as his dark eyes softened and began to return to the kind gaze she remembered, and when she saw tears start to form along their rims, a giant smile broke out on her own face.

"El," Hopper said, a tear slipping down his cheek as a smile formed on his own lips. El lunged forward, throwing her arms around Hopper's neck in a tight hug, and began sobbing into the crook of his neck as Hopper wrapped his arms tightly around her in return. "I am so sorry," he whispered.

"Don't be sorry," El said, pulling back and wiping the tears from her face. "I never thought I'd see you again."

"I'm back, kid. And I promise I won't go anywhere again," Hopper said, squeezing El's hands. She sniffled and dried the freshly fallen tears from her face.

"We need to get out of here," El said. "Brenner and the Russians are on their way to hurt my friends. Can you help me?"

"Anything you need," Hopper nodded, leading her to the door which Brenner had not bolted shut. They stepped out and looked around to see a nearly deserted space. The men seemed to have taken the two girls with them that El had not recognized. The only people El and Hopper could see were the doctor who was sitting in an armchair near the window and Max who was leaning against the wall in her cell.

"Hopper, you know she is not to be let out of her cell," Dr. Petrunin said as he quickly stood and walked toward them. He reached into the pocket of his lab coat and pulled out a syringe. "It is also time for your daily dose."

"I don't think so," Hopper said, knocking the syringe out of Petrunin's hand. "I don't know what you've been giving me, doc, but I'm not taking it anymore." With a look of shock on his face, Petrunin moved to grab a radio to call to General Alekhin. Hopper quickly knocked the radio out of Petrunin's hand and with one swift motion his fist collided with the side of the doctor's face, and Petrunin fell to the floor.

"Did you kill him?" El asked with wide eyes.

"No, just knocked him out," Hopper replied.

"El, be careful! We can't trust him!" Max exclaimed from behind the steel bars of her cell. El and Hopper turned their attention to Max who was standing now, gripping the steel bars and glaring at Hopper.

"It's okay, Max," El assured her. "It was Brenner and the Russians. They were drugging him and messing with his mind, making him

think horrible things. But he's better now. He's Hopper again." Hopper looked around the room and picked up a folding chair. He slammed it against the padlock on Max's door, causing Max to shriek and jump backwards, and the padlock broke open. Hopper removed it and pulled the door open, allowing Max to be free.

"Th-thanks," Max said, looking up at the man who had knocked her unconscious the previous day.

"You're welcome," Hopper replied.

"Max, I can explain everything later, but I need you to trust me about Hopper right now. Can you do that?" El asked, knowing her friend was still skeptical. El could see Max was considering her request, and finally she nodded in agreement.

"They all left. Brenner, the Russians, the girls. And they said something about releasing some creatures from below," Max said. El felt her stomach do a somersault as she thought about the horrors that Mike and her friends could be facing.

"We need to find them," El said firmly, and Max nodded. As El, Max, and Hopper started toward the door, it suddenly opened, and in the doorway stood one of the girls that El did not know. It was silent for a moment as the three of them stared at the young girl who stared back at them.

"And where are we off to this evening?" the girl finally spoke. El took several swift strides until she was face-to-face with the girl. She grabbed the girl's hand and lifted it slightly, pulling up her sleeve to reveal her 009 tattoo. Nine ripped her arm out of El's hand. "Get your hands off me."

"Sister," El said simply, lifting her sleeve to show Nine her 011 tattoo.

"I know who you are," Nine said. "Papa has been looking for you for more than two years."

"And you have been helping him?" El asked.

"Yes, recently. Within the past several months," Nine replied. "You don't belong out there. You belong with the rest of us." El shook her

head, truly saddened for the girl standing before her.

"That is not true. I know what you're going through with Papa," El said. "I know what it is like for him to use you as a science experiment. He overworks your abilities and makes you use them to his own advantage, no matter how weak or tired you get." El could tell she was right as the look on Nine's face fell.

"He isn't all bad," Nine insisted.

"I know it seems that way. I remember him reading me storybooks. I remember a time when I thought he cared about me. But to be honest with you, escaping from him and that place was the best thing I've ever done," El said. Nine was silent as she pondered what El said.

"Papa wanted me to check on you, so I saw you in my mind. I saw the policeman helping you," Nine explained.

"Does Papa know?" El asked, concern rising for Hopper if Brenner was planning on sending the Russians back to punish him.

"No," Nine replied.

"Then why are you here?" El asked.

"I was planning on taking care of the situation myself. Then, when Papa returned tonight, I would be able to say that the policeman turned on us, but I stopped him and the girl before they could get away," Nine explained, looking ashamed of herself.

"Don't you see? This is what Papa does. He wants us all to be so focused on pleasing him that we will do anything for his approval. You lied to him and came back here, potentially putting yourself in danger, just so you could get him to tell you that you did a good job?" El recapped. Nine shifted uncomfortably in the doorway and shrugged her shoulders.

"His is the only acceptance that matters," Nine muttered.

"I know it seems that way, but you don't have to live like this," El said.

"Yes I do. I'm not like you. I couldn't survive anywhere else," Nine insisted.

"It took me a long time to get to where I am now," El said. "When I left Papa, I could barely speak in full sentences. I didn't know anything other than what I had lived in the lab."

"Then how did you resist going back?" Nine asked.

"Because as scared and as lonely as I was out there, I was no where near as scared and lonely as I was with Papa. And then I met someone special, and I made friends, and I found a dad who actually cared about me. I learned what love actually is, and I knew within days of being out of that place that I could never go back," El explained. "You could help us. You can join us right now and help us take down Papa and save my friends. And then I'll help you learn all about love and friendship and family." El studied the girl's face. She could see the apprehension, as El was offering to take her from the only life she had ever known. El held Nine's gaze and saw how broken the girl really was; El having been there herself two and a half short years ago. When Nine opened her mouth to speak, El realized she had been holding her breath while waiting for the answer.

"Okay," Nine whispered with a nod. "If you really think you can help me live a life outside of this place."

"I can," El smiled. "But first, we have to stop Papa and the Russians. We have to save my friends." Nine returned El's smile, and the two of them along with Hopper and Max hurried out the door and took off into the woods to find the others and save them before it was too late.

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A/N: Thank you for bearing with me for so long. I will have the next chapter up tomorrow, so I promise you won't be waiting nearly as long. Leave me a review and let me know what you're thinking! Thanks for reading!

18. Chapter 18

CaptainRex12: Yes! I couldn't let Hopper stay on the bad side forever! Also, I know exactly what you're saying, and I agree, I don't like seeing stories end right after the action dies down. Don't worry, I still have plans for this one. There will be a solid 1-2 more chapters after this chapter, depending how things play out. I don't know how much fluffiness I can promise, but I'll do my best :)

Guest: Thank you! Yes, I figured getting the real Hopper back would be a favorite haha

Glouton: Thank you!

Thebreeze105.5: Thank you! I appreciate it. And yes, Hopper is back!

Phieillydinyia: That's the reaction I was going for with the Hopper/El scene! And we will have to see what happens with everything else... ;)

011MilevenShippar: Haha what a coincidence

Lpswolf2007: Thank you so much! I am glad you like it.

Disclaimer: I do not own Stranger Things or any of its original characters.

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"What are we going to do?! Do you see the size of that thing?" Dustin asked frantically as the creature they were watching made its way closer and closer to them. Like Will had said, it was even bigger than the Mind Flayer. It appeared to be moving with four legs through the trees, and it had at least four other extremities with pincers waving wildly around, knocking over tree after tree on its path to where the kids stood.

"Stand back," Nancy instructed, stepping so she was slightly in front of the others. She lifted her shotgun and aimed toward the nameless

monster, firing three rounds back to back to back. Nancy lowered her weapon in frustration when the monster didn't even flinch. "I don't even think I hit it. We need to move!" The eight of them began to run through the trees away from the monster that was coming toward them, when Will's foot got lodged under a hidden root under the snow and he crashed face-first to the ground, screaming in pain.

"Will! Are you okay?" Jonathan asked, running to his brother's side and kneeling next to him in the snow.

"My ankle! I twisted it," Will hissed, pulling his leg to his chest. Jonathan looked in panic back and forth between the approaching monster and the rest of the group.

"How bad? Can you walk?" Jonathan asked, grabbing Will's hand and starting to pull him to his feet without waiting for a response. When Will shifted weight onto his injured foot, his knee buckled and he went down again with a cry of agony.

"No! It hurts!" he hollered from the ground, pulling his leg to his chest again.

"Okay, Steve! Steve, I need you to help me," Jonathan cried, desperately waving Steve over and trying not to think about the thing crashing toward the trees getting closer and closer to them. Steve hurried over to Jonathan's side and lifted one of Will's arms around his neck while Jonathan supported Will's other side.

"Let's get out of here," Steve said when he and Jonathan had Will situated. As the group started to run away again, one tree ahead of them to their left was suddenly ignited in flames and fell on its side, blocking their path. Collectively, they screamed and turned to see the monster had made its way to them. It stretched one of its limbs outward to grab another tree in its pincers, and where its face should have been, a hole opened up and fire shot out, igniting another tree which dropped to their side, blocking another escape route.

"Holy shit, this one breathes fire?!" Dustin screamed.

"We have to do something! Nancy, try shooting it again now that it's closer," Mike called to his sister. Nancy nodded and aimed right at

the center of the mountainous beast before her. She fired two more rounds, and once again the monster was unphased.

"It looks like the bullets are going straight through it!" Nancy panicked.

"Then we need to get out of here!" Steve repeated. He pulled Will alongside himself, and the group started to run in the only direction that wasn't blocked by the monster or a burning tree. Nancy, Robin, Mike, Dustin, and Lucas were ahead of the other three, and after a moment they heard the sound of another tree being uprooted. They turned to see the monster holding another tree in its pincers, about to drop it to separate the group.

"Jonathan! Steve! Run!" Nancy shrieked. Simultaneously, Mike and Lucas sprinted toward Steve and Jonathan who were struggling to move quickly while carrying Will's weight. Mike grabbed Steve's free hand, and Lucas grabbed Jonathan's, and the two of them yanked the older boys toward themselves, causing themselves to fall backward and Steve, Jonathan, and Will to fall on top of them in the snow. From the ground with Steve on top of him, Mike couldn't see, but he heard the tree crash into the ground just feet from where they were laying.

"Oh my god! Are you okay?!" Nancy ran to the boys as Steve and Jonathan began to stand up, leaving Mike, Lucas, and Will laying in the snow. Nancy swept Jonathan's hair from his forehead and hugged him tightly before turning to Mike and offering her hand to pull him up. Lucas also stood and pulled Will to stand on his uninjured leg.

"We have to fight it," Steve panted, realizing they were not going to be able to outrun this thing.

"Are you insane?" Nancy turned toward him, eyes widened. "I've shot five rounds at it and it hasn't slowed down once! You think you'll get close enough to hit it with that damn bat of yours?"

"No, but we can't just stand here. So reload and let's kill this thing or go out fighting," Steve said, taking off his backpack and tossing it at Nancy so she could reload her shotgun with the ammo she had brought.

"All right, stay back," Nancy said to the four younger boys who moved a few paces behind her. Nancy took a deep breath before aiming once again at the middle of the monster. She held her breath and counted to three before pulling the trigger.

Not far from where Nancy was firing at the monster with the others huddled behind her, El, Max, Hopper, and Nine were trudging through the snow as quickly as they could. When El heard the sound of an explosion in the near distance, she stopped in her tracks and turned in a quick circle, taking in her surroundings and trying to see the source of the sound. She saw nothing but trees, snow, and her three companions.

"What was that noise?" El asked.

"Gunshot," Hopper replied definitively. Another gunshot rang through the woods, and the four of them looked onward in the direction it came from.

"It has to be them," El said, taking off toward the sound.

"El, wait! You need to be careful. We don't know who is shooting or what they're shooting at," Hopper said, grabbing El by the shoulder to stop her. "Let me go first. You all stay behind me." El nodded and let Hopper take the lead. As they got closer, the sound of a third gunshot filled the air, and Nine snapped her eyes over to El who had jumped nearly a foot off the ground.

"Hey, I have an idea that may help," Nine said, seeing the panicked look on El's face. "Let me find Papa real quick. Then we will know exactly where they are and if they are the ones shooting. We will have a better idea of what we are up against." El looked at Hopper for approval, and once he nodded his agreeance, El told Nine to do it.

"Do you need anything?" El asked, knowing that when she was able to spy on people, she needed certain conditions to help achieve the best results. But, Nine shook her head. She closed her eyes and focused on Brenner, while El, Max, and Hopper stood by and waited, feigning patience as best as they could. After a few moments, Nine opened her eyes again and came back to reality with a jolt.

"They aren't the ones shooting. They don't have any weapons that I could see," Nine said. "But Four is using her powers. I can't see what she is making appear, but she is working hard."

"That means they found my friends," El said, a chill running down her spine as her mind filled with the possible horrors that Four could be making them see.

"We have to get to them," Max said anxiously.

"What way?" El asked Nine. Nine pointed off to the right, and Hopper began to lead in that direction.

"It's not working!" Nancy cried, holding her shotgun down by her side and wiping her arm across her eyes to get rid of the few tears that had formed in her panic and frustration.

"Let me try," Steve said, grabbing the Glock from the holster that Nancy was wearing on her hip, causing her to jump in surprise. Steve aimed the gun at the monster and shot six times before lowering his arm. He swallowed hard as the monster towered over him, not once being hit by a single bullet.

"Steve, get down!" Dustin screamed from where he stood behind Nancy as the monster swung one of its limbs toward Steve. Steve fell forward and flattened himself to the ground, closing his eyes against the snow. He felt the monster's limb swing right over him, knowing it would have knocked him out if he were still standing. Steve scrambled to his feet and backed up to join the rest of the group. The eight of them looked up at the massive creature towering over them, surrounded by burning trees, and none of them could move.

"Oh God. This is it. This is how it ends," Dustin squeaked, closing his eyes tightly and waiting for one final blow from the monster to take them all out. Just then, they all heard a familiar voice yelling to their right.

"Mike! Mike!" El's voice reached their ears, and the eight of them turned to see El and Max standing between two trees a mere fifty yards from where the monster stood over them.

"El! Get out of here!" Mike yelled back.

"It's not real! Whatever you're seeing, it's not real!" El cried. Mike looked away from El and shared a look of confusion with the rest of the group. Further to El and Max's right, Hopper and Nine were approaching the mound behind which Brenner and Four were concealing themselves.

"Brenner!" Hopper growled from behind him. The thin, white-haired man turned to face his former prisoner just in time for Hopper's fist to collide with his cheekbone. Four barely noticed the commotion, as she was still focused on the illusion she was creating in the woods. Suddenly, she felt hands on both of her shoulders, and her eyes shot open just in time to see Nine throw her into a tree. Four felt the back of her head smack the tree trunk hard, and her vision became fuzzier and fuzzier until she hit the ground and her vision went black.

With Four being knocked out, the illusion she had created began to disappear. The group watched in amazement as the monster began to dissolve before their eyes. The burning trees that surrounded them slowly disappeared, and the woods began to go back to normal. In mere seconds, the fallen trees were standing again where they belonged, and there were no signs of the monster that had been chasing them through the woods. El and Max did not know what their friends had seen, but they could tell by the relief that was flooding their faces that whatever the vision had been, it had disappeared. The two girls ran toward their friends, and El jumped right into Mike's open arms, throwing her arms around his neck as he wrapped his tightly around her waist.

"I'm so glad you're okay," Mike whispered. He pushed El's hair back and kissed her lips while Lucas embraced Max next to them.

"I was so worried about you," Lucas said, pulling Max as close to himself as he could as she wrapped her arms around his waist.

"I knew you'd find me," Max said quietly, looking up into Lucas's eyes as he smiled down at her.

While El and Max were reuniting with everyone, Hopper and Nine began to walk toward them, leaving Four and Brenner knocked out in

the snow behind them. El smiled at the looks of shock, relief, and happiness that crossed her friends' faces as they saw Hopper approaching them. When Hopper and Nine reached the others, El embraced Hopper in a long hug before turning to her friends to explain.

"I knew he was alive," she said through her smile.

"Hey kids," Hopper grinned, pulling Jonathan and Will into a hug. Will closed his eyes to hold back the tears that had started to form at the thought of how happy his mom would be when she found out Hopper was still alive.

"And this is Nine. She has powers similar to what mine were. I promised to help her find a life outside of Papa," El explained. Nine smiled and exchanged hellos with the group that El introduced her to.

"So this is the dad you found, and these are the friends you found. Who is the someone special you met?" Nine asked El, referring back to El's explanation of how she was able to adapt to life outside the lab. El felt her cheeks blush red and glanced over at Mike, a smile forming on her face when she saw him also blush.

"This is Mike. We've been dating for a little over a year," El explained. Just then, their happy reunion was interrupted by the sound of rustling behind them. El and Hopper turned to face the direction where Brenner and Four had been hiding, and El's stomach dropped when she saw Volkov and Sokolov helping Brenner to his feet. Brenner swept the snow off of his arms, and the side of his face was red from where Hopper's fist had hit him, but the glare he was shooting at El and Hopper was unmistakable.

"Son of a bitch," Hopper said under his breath. He instinctively reached to where his holstered gun would be during his police days, and he cursed again when he realized he did not have it. "Steve, give me that gun." Steve complied and handed over Nancy's handgun. Hopper took a few steps toward Brenner.

"Jim, this is a shame," Brenner said coldly, to which Hopper did not respond. Brenner shifted his eyes to Nine who stood next to El. "And

Nine. I never thought you would be this weak."

"She's the opposite of weak. She's standing up to the only father figure she's ever known and leaving behind her entire way of life," Hopper countered.

"Jim, I hate to tell you this, but none of you will have lives at all after this," Brenner said. He turned his focus to El. "Eleven, this is your final chance to join us and cooperate this time." El's cold eyes were shooting daggers at Brenner, paying the Russians next to him no mind.

"Even if my powers were back, I would never help you," she said coolly. Brenner nodded slightly and appeared to let out a heavy sigh.

"Very well," he muttered before turning to Volkov and Sokolov. "Release them." Volkov stepped a few yards away and began clearing a sizable patch of snow. El's heart began to beat faster and faster while watching him until Volkov leaned down and unlocked a padlock, opening a wooden door that appeared to lead into the ground.

"You see, there is a tunnel underground that leads from this point all the way to the base my men built. In a moment's time, you'll wish you had just cooperated, Eleven, because what is coming for you all now is not another illusion," Brenner said eerily. Mike grabbed El's hand and pulled her backward as the group started to step back, feeling the ground begin to rumble louder and louder until a familiar monster finally appeared, jumping out of the opening in the ground.

"Oh shit!" Lucas exclaimed. Within seconds, three more of the same creature had joined, and the four of them turned toward the kids.

"Demogorgons!" Dustin cried out before turning to run in the opposite direction. Everyone followed rapidly, Steve and Jonathan carrying Will, and Mike grasping El's hand tightly. They ran through the trees, stumbling in the snow, and hearing the roars of the demogorgons behind them and the sound of snow crunching and sticks breaking as the monsters got closer and closer. Suddenly, the sound of gunshots filled the air again as Hopper fired at the monsters that were threatening them. One of the demogorgons charged at Hopper and

knocked the gun out of his hand. Hopper watched as the gun flew into the woods, lost in the snow. He turned and ran in a different direction, hoping to lure at least one of the monsters away from the kids.

"Dustin! Look out!" Lucas yelled to his friend who was cowering behind a thick tree trunk while one of the demogorgons appeared behind him. Dustin turned and saw the demogorgon and screamed, falling backward into the snow. The demogorgon roared loudly and leaned over Dustin, hovering over his face. Dustin closed his eyes as the demogorgon's mouth opened up, releasing another roar. Lucas pulled his wrist rocket out of his pocket and aimed a rock at the demogorgon. The rock shot straight into the demogorgon's mouth, and it looked up from Dustin, setting its target on Lucas.

"Shit," Lucas whispered before grabbing Max's hand and taking off running again, the pissed off demogorgon trailing them. Just then, the monster that was chasing Lucas and Max was thrown backwards into a tree. Lucas and Max stopped and looked at the wounded demogorgon in confusion. Then, the other three monsters were flung into the same tree, and the four demogorgons laid in a pile, unable to move.

"Holy shit! She's as strong as El!" Lucas exclaimed when he saw Nine standing between the trees, holding both of her arms out toward the demogorgons with blood dripping down her nose.

"You guys need to get out of here! I can't hold them very long!" Nine cried. The others gathered together and watched in awe as Nine held the four demogorgons in place, giving them time to escape.

"Give it up, Nine," Brenner's voice rang through the trees. El looked to see him walking near them followed by Volkov, Sokolov, and a wobbly Four who must have recently awoken. El felt chills course through her veins and her palms began to sweat as she looked from Nine's struggling face to Brenner walking near them to her friends.

"Guys, we've got to go," Lucas said hurriedly.

"But what will happen to her?" Mike pointed at Nine. Lucas shot him a 'who cares' look, but no one answered.

"She needs help," El said quietly.

"Get out of here!" Nine shrieked, not taking her eyes off of the demogorgons. El could see Nine's body shaking, but her eyes were still full of determination on her pale white face as she held the demogorgons as long as she could. A moment later, Nine dropped to the ground in exhaustion, releasing her hold on the monsters who then stood up and prepared to charge once again. El swallowed the lump in her throat before turning to face Mike and taking his hands in hers.

"I love you. Please never forget that," El said. She bit her bottom lip, and Mike saw tears forming in her eyes before she let go of his hands and turned away from him, walking toward Brenner.

"El, stop!" Mike called after her, but El did not turn back. Mike started to run after her, but Lucas and Dustin pulled him back. El stopped walking halfway between where she had stood with Mike and where Brenner stood watching her.

"It is too late to change your mind, Eleven," Brenner said.

"I will never change my mind," El replied.

El closed her eyes and focused on the demogorgons. She could feel that nothing was happening, and she heard them growling as they moved closer to her friends. El remembered what Kali had taught her when she had briefly struggled with her powers in Chicago. She focused hard on channeling her anger. El squeezed her eyes tightly as she saw the torture her mother had endured, being ripped from her mother as a baby, her mother sitting completely lost in that rocking chair. She saw Brenner sitting across a table from herself to work her to exhaustion by using her powers. She saw herself being dragged down that endless hallway and thrown in a cell. El focused on Brenner and all the pain he had made her feel, all the years she had lived without love, all the experiments that had been run on her. She felt a familiar sensation begin to spread through her body as she raised one arm out in front of her toward the demogorgons. Briefly, El heard the demogorgons grunt in discomfort, but she quickly tuned out her surroundings again and maintained her focus. She squeezed her eyes tighter and channeled every ounce of anger and hatred that

she had for Brenner. Inside, she could feel her returning powers growing stronger, but they were no where near their full potential. El let the one feeling into her mind that was stronger than her hatred for Brenner; her love for Mike. She saw that beam of light from that flashlight in the woods on November 7, 1983. She saw herself sitting in the blanket fort in Mike's sweats, looking up at him on that first night when he named her 'El, short for Eleven.' She saw him kiss her for the first time at the middle school. She saw them reunite at the Byers' house after 353 days. She saw him light up when she entered the gym at the Snow Ball and kiss her again, the night their relationship officially began. El felt her powers growing stronger and stronger, and she clenched her jaw tightly. She saw kiss after kiss, his brown eyes, his smile when he would look at her. She saw Thanksgiving and Christmas and New Years. El focused only on the love that she felt with each new experience he had shown her over the past year. Finally, she felt her powers spilling over the top, and El raised her other arm to hold both parallel, facing the demogorgons. Her eyes shot open as the air was filled with her agonizing scream.

The four demogorgons were frozen mid-air, and Brenner, Volkov, Sokolov, and Four were rooted to the ground where they stood. El's scream echoed from every tree and continued louder and louder until suddenly all four demogorgons exploded. Pieces of slimy flesh flew throughout the woods. Brenner, Volkov, Sokolov, and Four dropped to the ground, dead, blood having oozed from their ears, eyes, noses, and mouths. Mike dropped his hands that had been covering his ears and ran toward El as she fell to the ground.

"El! El!" he cried as he reached her side. He turned El onto her back and saw that she was unconscious and her body had gone completely limp. The rest of his friends and Hopper ran over, but Mike did not notice them. He began shaking El's shoulders as tears rolled down his cheeks. For a brief moment, he thought he saw El's eyes try to flutter open.

"El, you did it. You saved us. And Brenner is dead. You never have to worry about him again," Mike said to her through his tears. Behind him, Jonathan put his arm around Nancy's shoulders as she began to cry.

"I need you to wake up," Mike said, his voice cracking as he lifted El's

body slightly and cradled her in his arms. "Please... just wake up. We can have whatever life you wanted... in a few years, we can get married. We can buy a house with a big yard and have as many babies as you want... I just need you to wake up."

"Mike," Nancy whispered, kneeling beside her brother with her own cheeks soaked in tears.

"No. She's going to be okay, Nancy, she's got to be," Mike cried. "She promised me I would never lose her again." Mike pulled El's limp form to his chest and buried his face in her neck while he sobbed, and Nancy wrapped her arms around him silently. In the darkness, the last thing that El vaguely felt was Mike's familiar heartbeat and being wrapped in his arms before she went entirely numb.

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A/N: Thank you for reading this chapter. I really, really hate to do this to you all, but I will be out of town for a wedding this weekend, so I likely won't be able to get the next chapter to you until early next week. Please leave me a review though, and let me know what you think. I will get back to you all as soon as I can!

19. Chapter 19

A/N: Welcome back. This chapter took me quite some time to write, as I had a 1986 calendar pulled up for reference the entire time. You will understand why momentarily. I hope you all enjoy this!

Grievesforyou: Thank you! I am glad you like it!

Guest: Thank you. We will have to wait and see!

Thebreeze105.5: I know, it's probably the biggest cliffhanger I've written in this story! I am so glad you like it though!

Mario Quade: Thank you for your honesty in your review. I know not everyone will love everything that I write, and constructive criticism is always welcome. Thank you for the words of encouragement as well, I do appreciate it. Maybe some day I will have a story on here that you feel flows better. If so, feel free to let me know :)

Phieillydinyia: I'm sorry! Hopefully this chapter will make up for that.

Guest: We will have to see.

CaptainRex12: Thank you so much for all your kind words. I am glad you've enjoyed it so much! I hope this chapter lives up to any expectations :)

Jenicakrung: Sadly, all good things must come to an end. I am glad you have enjoyed this story though!

Oldestj1: Here you go!

39CluesStrangerThingsFan-Star: Aww! I promise you will see El's fate this chapter.

Pepperquack: Thank you so much! I am glad you enjoyed it so far.

Disclaimer: I do not own Stranger Things or any of its original characters.

0-0-0

January 8, 1986

Mike sat in the chair next to El's bed, his hand gently grasping hers while his thumb caressed her palm. The room smelled sterile and was silent other than the consistent beeps of the machines on either side of his girlfriend. El lay peacefully and still; if it weren't for the wires attached to her, Mike could believe she was just napping. But she wasn't. She had not awoken after the previous day's events. Once Nancy had succeeded in peeling Mike away from El, Hopper had picked her up and run through the woods, the rest of the group tailing him, until he reached the Wheelers' house. Hopper had considered calling 911, but he made the decision that waiting for an ambulance would take too long, so he had laid El in the backseat of Jonathan's car with Mike, and Hopper had sped to the hospital, ignoring most traffic laws as well as the red and blue lights that had appeared in his rearview mirror when he was less than a mile away from the hospital. When Hopper had pulled up to the door of the emergency room, the wailing police car still following, he had instructed Mike to run inside to get someone while Hopper quickly explained his actions to the cop. The events after that had been a blur to Mike while emergency doctors and nurses came in and out. It had not been until late last night when a doctor had pulled Hopper aside in the waiting room, as Hopper had identified himself as the girl, Jane Hopper's, father, and explained to him her condition. Hopper then had the unfortunate task of informing Mike that El had fallen into a coma. While she was alive, there was no way to tell if or when she would ever wake up.

"El," Mike said quietly, although he was the only visitor in the room. "I don't know if you can hear me or not, but Nancy said she read somewhere that people in comas can hear what's going on around them, so I'm going to try. You were so brave yesterday... Not that you aren't brave every day, because you are. But yesterday, you didn't even know for sure if your powers would come back or not, and you still faced those monsters without thinking twice." Mike stopped and ran his fingers through her hair that was laying on her

pillow.

"Everyone is doing okay, by the way," he continued. "They're all worried about you, of course. Mrs. Byers made it in to town yesterday. She was pulling up to my house as Hopper was leaving with you and me for the hospital. Jonathan filled her in on everything. So she's here, out in the waiting room, waiting to see you. Hopper's out there too... And my parents are getting back from my dad's conference tonight. Nancy has some story she's going to give them to explain why you're in the hospital here in Hawkins. I think it's something about you forgot something at my house, so Jonathan was bringing you back and you hit the blizzard and got into a car wreck... I don't know, I guess as long as they don't see that Jonathan's car is okay, it'll be fine. I don't care about the cover story, I just care about you getting better." Mike swallowed the lump in his throat as he looked at El's still face.

"I have to get going soon so they can each have a turn before visiting hours are over," Mike said. "But this is only day one. I'll be back to see you every day until you wake up. I went 353 days without giving up on you once, I can do it again if I have to... But God, I hope I don't have to. I hope you wake up soon, El. I love you." He kissed El on the forehead and stood slowly, giving her hand a squeeze before releasing it and walking out of the room.

February 14, 1986

"Happy Valentine's Day," Mike said to his girlfriend before kissing her forehead and taking a seat next to her bed. It was around 3:30 that Friday afternoon, and Mike was making his daily visit to El on his way home from school.

"Today is day number thirty-eight," he said, leaning back in the chair and looking over at the ledge which held cards and flowers from their friends. Joyce was typically the one to tend to the display; it kept her busy when she would visit El on weekends. "Mrs. Byers will be back tomorrow morning. Will is coming with her this time. He feels bad that he hasn't been to see you since everything happened, but it has nothing to do with you... He just has a hard time with hospitals, which is understandable."

"You'd be happy to know that Hopper's cabin looks as good as new. It took us a couple weeks to get everything repaired, but it is all ready for you to move back in," Mike continued. "Well, I hope you get to move back in, anyway. I guess that will be up to Hopper and Mrs. Byers... But who knows, maybe now that Hopper is back, Mrs. Byers will finally move back to Hawkins, and everything will be just like it was a year ago. We'll all be here together... Maybe it's wishful thinking, but it could happen."

"Hopper really is a great guy, by the way. It's almost embarrassing how shitty I treated him last year," Mike said. "He didn't even hesitate taking that Nine girl in. They're working on getting her a birth certificate done up, like he did for you. Her name's going to be Nina, which is... original. But, she's been living with Hopper in the cabin. Hopper gave her his room and he has been sleeping on the couch in the living room, so your room is still yours and yours alone, waiting for you to wake up and go back to it." Mike looked at his watch and knew he had to head home.

"Thirty-eight days, and it hasn't gotten any easier to leave you," he muttered. "Anyway, I just wanted to say Happy Valentine's Day and tell you how much I love you and miss you." Mike kissed her cheek and left for the thirty-eighth time.

March 30, 1986

"Hey, El," Mike walked over to the side of her bed and held her hand. "Today is Easter. Day number eighty-two. This was supposed to have been your next planned visit to Hawkins." Mike looked down at the suit he was still wearing, as he had just come from Easter Sunday service, and a sad smile crossed his face as he imagined El having been there next to him.

"You know, Easter would've been kind of a weird one to explain. Both the religious part of it and the commercial part of it... Today is the day that we go to church to celebrate Jesus Christ rising from the dead. But also, we tell children that a giant bunny sneaks into your house at night and hides multi-colored eggs for you to find... We painted Easter eggs last night, and Holly did an Easter egg hunt this morning. Actually, painting Easter eggs can be kind of fun. You'll get to see that next year." Mike looked toward the closed door of El's

hospital room and then back at his sleeping girlfriend.

"Um, my parents and Nancy and Holly are also out there. They knew I was going to come see you after church, and Mom thought it would be nice for the whole family to stop by. They let me come in alone first to see you, but I'm gonna go ahead and bring them in," Mike said, letting go of El's hand and walking over to open the door, waving his family inside. Karen, Ted, and Nancy walked into the room, Karen carrying Holly on her hip. Karen gasped at the sight of El laying unconscious in the hospital bed with machines surrounding her.

"Ellie sleeping," Holly said, pointing toward the bed.

"Yes, she is," Karen said quietly, smoothing her young daughter's hair as she sat in the chair near El's bed with Holly on her lap. "Ellie is sick right now, but she's going to get better and wake up soon."

"I must say, for being in a car accident, she made it out without any noticeable marks," Ted observed.

"She hit her head hard on the window," Nancy explained. "Jonathan was going a bit faster than he should've been, and he lost control and started spinning out and went off the road. He didn't even notice she was hurt until the car stopped moving."

"Such a shame," Karen shook her head. "Such a sweet, beautiful girl. She shouldn't be stuck here like this." Mike nodded his head at his mother's words as he stood beside El holding her hand and watching her face, still hoping to see her eyes open.

"Karen, we should get going," Ted said after a few minutes of silence. Karen nodded and stood up along with Holly and headed toward the door. Nancy and Mike hung back to speak to El without their parents.

"Mike, do you mind if I have a minute with El?" Nancy asked. Mike was a little surprised by the request, but he gave El a kiss on the forehead, told her he loves her, and left the room like his sister asked. Nancy pulled the chair closer to the side of El's bed and laid her hand overtop of El's hand that was resting to her side on the mattress.

"El, there is a lot I want to say to you, but I'll try to be quick," Nancy began. "Thank you for being so brave. You saved all of our lives, and I just... you were amazing. And I'm sorry that I was so hesitant at first when you came back and told us about your nightmare. I shouldn't have doubted you... And maybe it wasn't that I didn't believe you, but maybe I didn't want to believe you because that would mean that something was still out there and after you. Regardless, I shouldn't have made you feel like you weren't believed. I'm so sorry for that. And I know Jonathan is too."

"I don't know for sure if you can hear me or not, but I hope you can," Nancy continued. "You are such a strong person, and if you can hear me at all, please know that I need you to use that strength one more time and wake up. Fight whatever you have to fight to get out of there and come back... because this is killing Mike, and I can't keep watching my little brother come home from the hospital every day with red eyes from crying on the way home. So just, please, if you can hear me, fight like hell one more time to come back to us."

April 24, 1986

"It's day 107," Mike said, taking a seat next to El's bed after arriving at the hospital after school. "Today's also my birthday. It's been so weird for my parents because for the last week or so they've been asking me what I want for my birthday, and I'm not trying to be difficult or anything but I honestly don't know or even care about that. As cheesy as I know this is going to sound, the only person who would be able to give me what I want on my birthday would be you, and that would be you waking up."

"But, I think the party is still doing something for me on Saturday," Mike continued, leaning back in the chair. "They told me not to make any plans for Saturday afternoon, and Max asked me what kind of cake I like... so they're not exactly the sneakiest. I don't know, I mean, I appreciate what they're trying to do, but I just find it so hard to care about anything right now... my birthday, school, literally everything that they ask me to do... I still go to the arcade with them and they still come over and hang out, but I'm just kind of there, you know, like I don't feel joy anymore... But today everyone was telling me 'happy birthday,' and I had to smile and thank them and it's just so fake. And Saturday I'm going to have to put on a smile and act like

I'm having a good time with everyone, and I'm just going to feel numb and be counting down to when I can leave and come visit you again."

"I don't know," Mike sighed, rubbing his eyes. "I don't mean to sound so depressing and pathetic. I just really miss you. I need you to come back."

May 23, 1986

"Good news," Mike said, taking El's hand as he sat in the chair next to her bed and dropped his backpack next to it. "Today was our last day of school for the year; so that means I'll be able to start seeing you more. I won't have to wait until 3:30, and I can stay longer than I have been because I won't have homework to worry about."

"Even better news," he continued, "Will called me last night and said that they're moving back to Hawkins this summer. Apparently, Mrs. Byers wanted to wait until the schoolyear was over, which makes sense. But since Hopper is back and they've been coming to Hawkins nearly every weekend to see you anyway, it just makes sense. Will said his mom had been thinking about it for a while, and I guess she realized that getting away from Hawkins didn't give her the peace she was looking for... I agree, I think being able to live here and be happy after everything that has happened shows a lot more growth than running out of the city... But I'm just happy they're coming back. Jonathan is staying there, though, for college, and Nancy got in to the same school he goes to, so she'll actually be moving out later this summer."

"It's so crazy how quickly things change. God, I wish you were awake to see it all," Mike said, squeezing El's hand. "I wanted so badly to spend this summer with you. I mean, I still plan on visiting you every day, but I wanted to be able to do things together. Go to the lake, the fair, road trip to an amusement park so you could experience roller coasters... It's just not fair. This is day number 136. I know there's still quite a ways to go before we reach the longest I've gone without you, but I think this time is almost harder than last time... This time, I can see you and touch you and talk to you. You're right here... but you're also not here. I don't know, it's hard to explain."

"Anyway, Max told me that she stopped by to see you yesterday. I'm glad she's putting in the effort. She really has been a great friend to you," Mike continued. "I'll see about trying to get the boys to come see you again. I think they've only been out here once or twice. Just know that they all still miss you and want you to get better. But I have to get going. I love you, and I'll see you tomorrow."

July 4, 1986

"It's day 178, and it's the fourth of July," Mike said. "We're all going to the carnival tonight. I really think you would love it. There are so many rides and games, and you've never had carnival food before. It's fantastic. And I'd love to watch the fireworks with you... I know there's always next year... You've got to be better by next year." Mike picked up a strand of El's hair and began twirling it around his fingers.

"I've actually had a pretty decent summer so far," he continued. "I didn't think I would be able to have as much fun as I have, but surprisingly I really enjoyed taking a day trip up to my family's lake house on Lake Michigan. It was better that they let my friends come, but still... And next weekend we're roadtripping to Ohio to go to this place called Cedar Point. It's got some of the best roller coasters in the world. I'll stop by and see you in the morning before we leave, and I'm actually excited and think I'll have a good time... Obviously, this summer would've been so much better if you could've been by my side, doing these things with me... But just wait until next year."

"Oh! Dustin ended things with Suzie," Mike remembered. "I told you he had been acting kind of weird since getting back from camp last week. Well apparently, he'd been crushing on Nina for the last few months since she's been around more because we agreed to help Hopper make sure she adjusts well. Anyway, I guess Dustin wanted to wait until he was reunited with Suzie to see if the feelings were still there, and when they saw each other at camp, Suzie was still head over heels for Dustin, but Dustin just didn't feel that way for her anymore. So, he broke up with her on the last day of camp, and he didn't tell us right away because he was still trying to figure out whether he really liked Nina or not. And I guess he does, but he hasn't said anything to her about it yet."

"To be honest, none of us were really surprised that things didn't work out with Dustin and Suzie," Mike admitted. "I always kept my thoughts about it to myself, because how hypocritical would it have looked for me to say that Dustin and Suzie wouldn't be able to work out with only seeing each other once a year and talking on Cerebro once a week. I'm not exactly in the position to voice doubt about long distance relationships... but it's different with me and you. It always has been... Anyway, I'm glad Dustin figured it out." Mike leaned back in the chair and sat silently next to El, studying her face and praying for her eyes to open. After about an hour, he looked at his watch and knew he had to leave to meet his friends for the carnival. He gave El a kiss on the forehead and told her he loved her before leaving for the day.

August 25, 1986

"Well, it's day 230. Today was the first day of school," Mike began, dropping his backpack at the end of El's hospital bed before taking his usual spot in the chair next to her. "We started our sophomore year of high school. Will was really happy to be back with Dustin, Lucas, Max, and me. I guess he really struggled in school last year with not really knowing anyone... Mrs. Byers said that when she was homeschooling you last year, she was really hoping that you would be ready to start at the high school this year... that would've been great to have you there with us. I know you'll wake up soon, so hopefully between Mrs. Byers and Hopper, they'll get you ready so we can all start our junior year together next year."

"I'm really happy that Will is back too. He and I have a couple classes together, and I have a couple with Lucas and Dustin, too. All four of us ended up in English together, along with Max, but that's the only thing we all have together," Mike explained. "I think you would like high school. Max would definitely love to have you there so she could see her best friend every day. I know she gets sick of just hanging out with the four of us every day."

"She and Lucas are actually doing okay right now," Mike continued. "She hasn't broken up with him over anything stupid or petty since before Christmas, actually. And she hasn't even threatened him with a break up since, I think, March. I think she's finally realizing that how you treat people matters. I'm not saying she and Lucas will end

up together for sure, but right now they're going pretty strong. Which reminds me, Dustin asked Nina to be his date to homecoming next month. Homecoming is this dance the high school has every fall. Anyway, Nina said yes once Dustin explained what it is, so that may actually work out. I'll let you know how it goes for them when he tells me after homecoming. I don't think I'm going to go... I have no reason to."

"I really wish I could stay longer, but my mom made this new rule that now that school has started back up, I can visit you for an hour, then I have to go home so I'll have time to do homework before dinner," Mike said. "I'll be back tomorrow, though. I love you."

October 31, 1986

"Today is Halloween," Mike said one Friday afternoon as he sat down for his hour-long visit with El. "It's also day number 297. We're getting way too close to 353 days, which is the longest I've ever gone without being able to hear your voice. I really hope you wake up before we get to that again... I'm not sure if I could handle it." He laced his fingers in between hers and rested his hand underneath hers on her bed.

"So, we're not going trick-or-treating. We're fifteen; we're too old for that. Instead, we're sneaking into the theater to see this new movie called *Trick or Treat*. I don't know if it's going to be any good, but there's not a lot to choose from right now. I don't know why so many good horror movies are always released over the summer instead of waiting until October," Mike shrugged. "I just realized you've never been to a movie theater... I'll take you when you're out of here. We can buy all the ridiculously priced concessions we want and see whatever movie you want to see... There are just so many things I want to be able to do with you... even as simple as going to a movie theater. I just really miss you. Please wake up soon."

November 27, 1986

"Happy Thanksgiving," Mike said, placing a kiss on top of El's head before grasping her hand and taking a seat next to her bed. Mike said nothing, just sat in silence holding her hand. He felt particularly sad today, and he figured that he would for the next month as long as El

remained unconscious, as he was not prepared to spend the holiday season without her, especially after spending them together the previous year.

"Day 324," Mike sighed, rubbing his thumb back and forth over the back of El's hand. "I really can't stay long today. My mom didn't want me to come at all. She said she's worried about me... I'm sure she has been for a while now. This has been going on all year long. I don't know if she expected me to give up after a couple weeks or a couple months, but you know I couldn't do that... This morning she told me that I'm torturing myself by clinging to you like this, and that it's not healthy for me to come to the hospital every day... And maybe she's right. Maybe it isn't healthy. But I'm going to keep doing it... I ran in to Hopper down in the lobby when I got here. He was on his way out. He knows I come see you every day. I think he may feel the same way as my mom, but he won't say anything about it because he knows the truth about what you and I have been through."

"I don't know, I guess I can see why she thinks it would be unhealthy," Mike sighed. "But I told her, just like I would tell Hopper if he ever does say anything, I know the day is coming when you're going to wake up. And I wouldn't be able to forgive myself if you woke up, and I hadn't been there because I gave up on you because visiting you wasn't healthy... I guess it sounds crazy out loud. Especially because I usually only see you an hour a day, and there's no guarantee you would wake up during that hour that I happen to be here... I guess it's just that I believe you can hear me. I believe that you know when I'm here. So you know that I've been here every single day... I can't imagine you waking up knowing that I haven't been here for you."

"I really don't feel like doing Thanksgiving today," Mike continued. "Obviously the food will be great, but this is literally the day when we are supposed to focus on what we're thankful for, and for me, the thing that I'm most thankful for in my life is laying helplessly in a hospital fighting for her life... My parents wouldn't truly understand any of it because they don't know what we've been through or how in love with you I really am... So I'll just tell you instead. El, I'm so thankful for every second we have spent together from that moment I saw you in the woods three years ago. I'm thankful that you changed

my life the way you did, and I know you say that I taught you the meaning of love, but you taught it to me too. You're the best thing that's ever happened to me, and the fact that you even want me to be with you is the thing I'll be the most thankful for my entire life." Mike left shortly afterward for the three hundred twenty-fourth time, wondering when he would be able to be thankful for El waking up.

December 25, 1986

"El, this is a hard day," Mike said gently. "This is day 352. If you don't wake up today, tomorrow we will be at 353 days again. So please, I am begging you to pull off some sort of Christmas miracle and wake up today." Mike squeezed her hand tightly, blinking tears back from his eyes. He sat back in silence; he had nothing more to say. He watched the light flurry of snow blowing around out the window and remembered fondly the previous Christmas they had spent together. Three hundred sixty-five days ago, Mike's biggest concern was whether El would like the bracelet he had bought her. Now, it was whether El would ever open her eyes again.

December 26, 1986

Mike was standing outside El's hospital room door, trying to make sure he was composed before going inside. He knew El was still not awake, so she wouldn't see if he broke down, but he still knew in his heart that she was still in there. He didn't want her to hear or feel how broken he was today. Mike took a deep breath and pushed the door open, walking inside to see the familiar sight of El laying unconscious in that hospital bed. He walked over to the ledge in front of the window and gazed over the numerous Get Well Soon cards and Merry Christmas cards that filled it. His eyes were then drawn to a small pile of wrapped packages sitting in the corner of the room under a small, four-feet artificial Christmas tree. Mike walked over and knelt down, looking at the tags on the presents. He smiled and felt his heart warm when he realized that Joyce and Hopper must have come by together the previous night and set up a small Christmas tree. There were four presents under the Christmas tree for El; two from Joyce and two from Hopper. Mike was happy to know that whenever El would wake up, this tree and those presents would be one of the first things she saw, helping her to know she wasn't forgotten about at Christmas.

"Hi, El," he said shakily as he walked over to her bedside and took her hand. "It's day three hundred fifty-th-" Mike's voice broke. He cleared his throat and sat in the chair next to her bed before swallowing the lump that filled his throat.

"Three hundred fifty-three," he managed. Mike was silent for a long time, knowing if he tried to speak, he would likely end up crying, and he didn't want El to hear that. So he sat holding her hand, hoping that she could sense that he was there. Finally, he knew he had to speak to her.

"El, I..." Mike's voice trailed off as his eyes filled with tears. "I really... truly never thought that this would last this long... I can't believe it's been three hund... this many days." Mike sat back in the chair and let the tears fall silently down his face.

December 31, 1986

Around eight o'clock in the evening, Mike, Max, Lucas, Dustin, Will, and Nina walked into El's hospital room. They had just come from dinner and were going to be ringing in the New Year as a group in El's hospital room. When Max had asked Mike what his New Years plans were and he had shrugged his shoulders and said he would probably spend it with El, Max came up with the idea of the whole group tagging along so they could all be together. She had run the idea past Lucas who agreed that it was a good idea, and when they presented it to Mike, he had hesitated at first, but he got on board. Typically, visiting hours were over at 8PM, but the hospital staff was making an exception for New Years so that patients had the opportunity to spend the holiday with their loved ones.

"El, it's Max. We're all here," Max said, approaching El's bed and hugging her small frame. Mike watched as Lucas, Dustin, and Will each took turns greeting El, and he noticed that the whole party being together again was actually lifting his spirits; this had been the first time they were all together since that day in January in the woods when everything happened.

"Mom and Hopper agreed to let us spend the evening with you, and they'll come by tomorrow to see you," Will said, pulling back from hugging El.

"Can she hear you?" Nina asked from the foot of El's bed. She had been silently observing everyone greet El as if she were a conscious member of the room.

"We don't know for sure. But I like to think that she can," Mike replied, picking up the remote control for the television hanging in the corner of the room and flipping through the channels in search of Dick Clark's special.

"So she knows that we're here?" Nina asked, and Mike shrugged again.

"I think so. But I guess we won't know for sure until she wakes up and tells us," he answered.

"You visit her often?" Nina continued.

"Every day," Mike said simply.

"The rest of us stop in sporadically. I usually stop in once a week or so," Max added. "Does Hopper ever bring you when he comes to visit her?"

"No, I have never been here. He offered once in the beginning to bring me with him, but I thought it would be best to give him alone time with his daughter," Nina explained. "She and I have many things to discuss, but that will all be more appropriate if she is awake."

"When she is awake, not if," Mike corrected her.

"And if you ever want to come by and see her, but you don't want to go alone or feel like you're imposing on Hopper's time, just let me know and I'll absolutely come with you," Dustin offered, reaching to grab Nina's hand and give it a gentle squeeze, a gesture not unseen by the rest of his friends.

"So, what did you guys bring for us to do?" Mike asked. Max hurried over to the bag she had brought with her and pulled out a deck of playing cards, a deck of Uno, and Monopoly.

"I veto Monopoly," Lucas said immediately.

"I'd be up for some Uno," Dustin suggested, to which Will and Mike agreed. They sat in a circle to the left of El's bed, and while Max began to shuffle and deal the cards, Dustin began giving an overview of the rules to Nina. Over the next several hours, the six of them played round after round of Uno before pulling out the regular playing cards and teaching Nina the rules to Go Fish.

Shortly before midnight, they packed up the games that Max had brought and turned up the volume on the television. Max poured everyone a glass of sparkling cider, and as the ball began to drop down the pole in New York City, Mike held on to El's hand while thinking ahead to 1987. She would wake up, and they would be able to pick up right where they left off. El would start their junior year of high school with them; they would celebrate every holiday together as a group without having to worry about Brenner or anything from the Upside Down. Finally, they would be able to live as normal teenagers. If Mike had any wish for 1987, that was it.

"Three... two... one. Happy New Year!" Max and Lucas embraced and shared a kiss on the lips, and Dustin took Nina's hand and leaned slowly toward her face until his lips softly brushed hers. When Dustin pulled back, the surprised look on Nina's face said that it had been her first kiss. Mike smiled as he remembered his and El's similar situation in the cafeteria over three years ago. Mike leaned over El's bed and kissed her cheek.

"Happy New Year, El," he said quietly. "I love you."

January 6, 1987

"El, today is day 364. Tomorrow is one year from the day that this happened," Mike said as he sat in the chair next to El's bed, holding her hand. "I think you'd be happy to know that Hopper and I are actually on pretty good terms now. The doctors and nurses won't tell me anything about your condition because I'm not family, but Hopper does his best to keep me informed. I know they say there hasn't been a lot of change over the year, but you've made slight improvements, and that's better than no improvements at all."

"I really wish you could answer me. Even just a word or a sign," Mike continued. "I love you so much, and I will keep coming here as long

as it takes to see you awake again, but I just wish I could know for sure that you've really been here with me this whole time... I just miss you. I need you to come back to me... I need you." Mike gave El's hand a squeeze and rested his head on his other hand, looking down at the ground. He sat silently, imagining El opening her eyes and everything getting back to normal. He remembered the sound of her laugh and the way her eyes lit up when she smiled. He thought about the feeling of her lips touching his in the way they hadn't in one day shy of a full year. He was so consumed in thinking about El, that he thought he imagined a gentle squeeze around his hand. Mike jumped slightly and lifted his eyes to look at his hand which still laid on El's bed holding her hand in his. He shook his head and silently cursed his imagination, when he suddenly saw El's fingers start to curl slowly around his hand and he felt another gentle squeeze. Mike's eyes widened and his heart began to race. Slowly, his eyes followed all the way up El's arm until her face came in to view, and Mike saw her eyelashes fluttering and her eyelids creating an opening that was so small, it was barely there. But it was there. Her eyes were opening.

"El?" Mike said excitedly. "El, can you hear me? Squeeze my hand again if you can hear me." Slowly, her fingers started to curl around Mike's hand for a third time.

"Oh my god. El! You're waking up!" Mike jumped from his chair and reached for the call button on the remote attached to El's bed, summoning a nurse. While he waited, he watched El's face as her eyes struggled to open to their full extent. As the door opened and a nurse hurried in, Mike became aware of the tears that were running down his face.

"What is it?" the nurse asked concerned as she came to a stop at the foot of El's bed.

"She's waking up," Mike pointed at El. The nurse called for assistance, and before he knew it, Mike was surrounded by medical professionals taking El's vitals, and he was pushed to the side so they could fully access her. Mike kept his eyes glued to his girlfriend, almost worried that if he were to look away, he would turn back to see her in a coma again.

"Her father is on his way," said a woman in scrubs who just entered the room. "She is stable. We'll have a lot to discuss with her father when he gets here." The staff began to slowly clear out, leaving Mike alone with El again. Mike grabbed El's hand and sat on the edge of her bed, looking into her brown eyes for the first time in 364 days.

"El, it's me," he said. Mike watched El's lips begin to move, and he thought she was attempting to form words. He was patient as El's lips separated slightly, closed again, then pursed tightly together. El's lips softened and Mike gave her hand a reassuring squeeze, encouraging her to try again when she was ready.

"M-Mike," she whispered hoarsely. To his own surprise, Mike let out a small sob as more tears fell from his eyes. She remembered him. He reached forward and wrapped his arms around her, embracing her in a hug that he never wanted to break.

"El, I'm right here. I've been here every day," Mike said quietly into her ear.

"I know," El whispered slowly. Mike noticed her wince in pain as she tried to speak, and he felt a brief internal conflict between wanting her to stop trying to speak so she isn't in pain and wanting to hear her voice.

"You know?" Mike repeated. El nodded her head slightly. The corners of her lips started to barely curl into a small smile, and Mike could see the familiar light in her eyes that happened when she smiled.

"I love you too," El managed in a slow, hoarse whisper. Mike was not able to wait any longer. He leaned forward and placed his lips on hers, and El felt the world fade away around them. The fight was over; she was safe again, and she was home.

Seven Months Later

The August sun was setting, casting pink, blue, and yellow through the clouds in the sky. The air was filled with the aroma of grilling hot dogs and hamburgers, and Hopper walked over to the picnic table and placed one plate of meat in the middle next to an array of buns and condiments. In the past, he may never have seen himself

enjoying hosting a cookout for a bunch of teenagers, but no one would ever guess that from the smile that had been plastered on Hopper's face all afternoon.

"Do you want me to watch the grill so you can get everything ready for the fire before it gets dark?" Joyce offered.

"Actually, that would be great," Hopper agreed. "Kids! Come eat!" Not needing to be told twice, the seven teenagers hurried out the front door of Hopper's cabin and over to the picnic table where the food had been placed.

"None of these have cheese. Who eats burgers without cheese?" Dustin asked, throwing his hands up in exasperation.

"There's Kraft singles right in front of you," Hopper called from the firepit where he was moving the wood he wanted to use.

"But it isn't melted like it would be if you put it on a patty on the grill," Dustin countered. Joyce held a hand up toward Hopper to prevent him from arguing any further, and she walked over to the picnic table to grab some cheese slices to put on the burgers currently cooking on the grill.

"So are you two excited to start school in a couple weeks?" Will asked, looking back and forth between El and Nina. They all noticed looks of apprehension on both girls' faces.

"I'm excited to see you guys every day and feel like a normal teenager," El replied honestly, leaving out her additional feelings of nerves of being around so many people. She didn't want to feel or look stupid in any of her classes either.

"I just don't want to make a fool out of myself," Nina added, almost as if she had read El's mind.

"I make a fool out of myself almost daily," Dustin smiled, putting his arm around Nina's shoulders. "You'll both do great."

"Plus, the three of us can go shopping for homecoming dresses next month," Max chimed in excitedly. Nina perked up at the memory of the dance she had gone to with Dustin the year prior, and El felt

nervous in the pit of her stomach, as she had not been to anything like a school dance since the Snow Ball two and a half years ago.

"That would be fun," El smiled, remembering that Max had helped her several times in situations where she had to step out of her comfort zone, and homecoming dress shopping would be no different.

"How are Nancy and Jonathan doing? Have you heard from them recently?" Dustin asked, turning toward Mike and Will.

"They actually got engaged," Mike replied. His friends collectively gasped and started asking about the details of the engagement, which Mike passed off to Will to explain.

"It was nothing too flashy. That wouldn't have been like Jonathan. He took her to a nice dinner and a walk through the park, saying he wanted to find some good shots for future pictures," Will explained. "Turns out, when he told her he found the perfect spot, he got down on one knee and asked her to marry him. He had one of his buddies from college hidden with a camera to get a photo of the proposal from the 'perfect spot.'"

"That is so cute," Max said, placing her hand over her heart.

"You mean corny," Lucas corrected her.

"Don't hold your breath for anything too romantic when this one pops the question, Max," Dustin joked, nudging Lucas with his elbow.

"Yeah, right. I think we all know who the first ones in our party to get engaged will be, and it's not me and Max," Lucas laughed, looking across the table as Mike began blushing. El smiled sweetly, thinking it was cute that Mike still got embarrassed by those types of jokes, and she leaned over to kiss his cheek.

"You know, I do want to thank all of you for how wonderful you've been over the past seven months," El said, changing the subject. "It hasn't been easy at all, but you've all been there for me. Mike, you've been so supportive through every physical therapy session I had, and Max you've been there to pick me up every time I started to feel low and think I would never get back to normal. It seriously means the

world to me that you all have stuck by me throughout this."

"Of course we would," Max smiled and reached across the table to squeeze her best friend's hand.

"Oh, and Nina! Living with a sister has been so wonderful, and I have had so much fun getting to know you," El added, and Nina smiled in return.

"All right, I've got the fire going!" Hopper called from the firepit.

"S'mores?" Lucas turned to Max. The two of them along with Dustin, Nina, and Will quickly stood and hurried over to the firepit, abandoning the remnants of their hamburgers and hot dogs.

"You're welcome, by the way," Mike said in reference to El's gratitude. "But you don't have to thank me for anything. You know I will be there with you throughout this whole thing, and anything else in the future."

"I know you will," El smiled, placing her hand on the side of Mike's face and leaning forward to connect their lips.

"I love you, El," Mike said when their lips had parted.

"I love you too, Mike," El replied. "Now, let's go have some s'mores." Mike stood and took her hand, and the two of them walked together to rejoin their friends, knowing that for the first time in nearly four years, they were free of any nightmares from the Upside Down and were able to focus on building their lives together, which is all either of them ever wanted.

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A/N: The End. Thank you all so much for reading. I really enjoyed writing this story, and honestly it took so many turns that I had never expected when I originally sat down with the idea. I won't spoil it now and tell you how I had originally planned the story, as it seems like most of you liked the way it played out. I do have several more stories in the planning process, and I hope to get one started on here within the week. So if you would like to follow me on to my next story, please feel

free, as I would love to see some familiar reviewers! Again, thank you for reading, and please leave a review to let me know what you thought of how it ended!